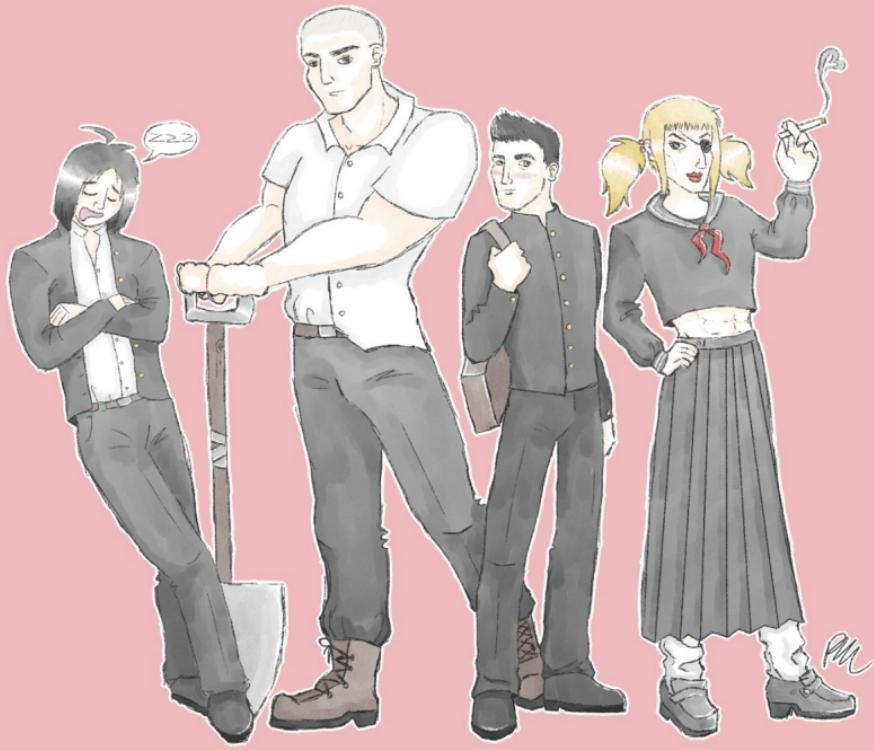


a Fanfiction novel by  
meemimajima

# her lips are devil red

彼女の唇は悪魔のような赤です



Special thanks to,

Make,  
for all the good ideas and brainstorming sessions

Kathy,  
for the support and shared struggles

Sega,  
for making videogame series this great

meemimajima  
(P. Majuri)

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Published & Printed by BoD – Books on Demand

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## E P I S O D E      1

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### New kids on the block

Picture this scene in front of you, if you would be so kind. A classroom, sun shining through the windows, peeking from behind the shutter shades. The floor is squeaky clean, reflecting the lights on students' happy little faces. The hopeful thoughts on this school year, just what adventures it would bring upon. The neat uniforms, girls in their black and white seifukus, and boys in white dress shirts and straight pants unified them.

At a quick glance, anyone could've been fooled that the feeling was mutual among everyone. However, the boy sitting in the back row, curiously peeking out of the

window, enjoying the spring's breeze playing with his stubborn hair, hoped the wind would blow his worries away. His face, sporting complexion which would turn this awkward teenage boy into a handsome young man in a few years' time, now carried an anxious look. His eyes, how they screamed he was missing something he'd never get back.

He felt so out of place. The desks in the classroom, they were in neat rows, four by six, and the ones he and the long-haired boy next to him sat, they were just thrown in the back. Hell, they were even different style desks, clearly picked out from storage maybe just an hour before the first class of the day, of the school year, took place.

"Good morning, class", said the teacher. The class returned the greetings of a pleasant start for the day, and after that, the teacher continued. "As you can all see, we have two new students. Boys, why don't you two introduce yourselves?"

The stress from leaving a good first impression made knees weak, arms heavy, trying your best not to throw up your MAMA cup noodle breakfast. Throat feeling drier than a desert. The anxious boy tried to swallow a few times to get some saliva moving, so he'd be able to get out proper words instead of a few sad coughs. Every step he took, from the back of the class to the front, was manual and calculated. Falling on your face now just because of an open shoelace would be the end of him

before he even had a chance for a proper start. The other boy didn't seem much calmer either.

"Hi... My name is Kiryu. Kiryu Kazuma. We moved from (curious chatter from the other students to hide up the fact author didn't find any proper source on where the boys spent their childhood) just last weekend. I, uh... I'm his older brother", Kiryu introduced. Well, at least he didn't totally freeze, or say anything stupid he'd end up regretting on those sleepless nights ten years from now.

The other boy picked off from where Kiryu had stopped.

"I'm Nishikiyama Akira, but feel free to call me Nishiki", he said, his nervousness shining through his very basic introduction. The teacher realized, soon enough, that the boys had nothing more to say, so he guided them back to their places.

"A long story short, huh? Well, I hope everyone will be nice to each other and you'll be able to make plenty of friends", he spoke, before returning to the normal schedule. The first lesson of the day was math. Kiryu had never been too interested in playing with numbers, but he had never really struggled with the subject either. He had about average grades, and it was good enough for him, not like he imagined himself working with big numbers or money. The thought of something like real estate management seemed not only absurd but boring.

The future, it all seemed so uncertain, almost surreal. What was the teacher had said about making new

friends? These new kids, they seemed all so tough and kind of scary. That, or maybe Kiryu was just a coward. Gazing outside the window, Kiryu spotted a group of students gathering in a corner where the sun didn't shine, forming a circle, a heavy cloud of smoke emitting from inside the formation. He had always thought it to be just an urban legend that students would smoke on recess, but as it had turned out just now, apparently he had been wrong. Would Kiryu had to start smoking too, to fit in? He hated the smell, and how it'd stick to his clothes. It would be something he couldn't hide back at home.

Kiryu was living the years of his youth, where one was supposed to bloom, to have a great time, do stupid things to have something to reminisce on your days of retirement. Which one would he rather get, a scolding or never-passing regret of things he never even tried just because he was a wuss?

"Psst, bro", Kiryu whispered. Nishiki lifted his head from his books, looking ever so slightly annoyed how his studies got interrupted.

"Look!" Kiryu continued, pointing the group of students outside, after catching his brother's attention.

"I'm pretty sure that's against the rules", Nishiki said.

"That's not what I meant. Should we do that too, to fit in?" Kiryu asked. Maybe if Nishiki was thinking the same, they'd approach some of those scarier looking students on their next break. Going in alone into a gang

like that, that'd be just asking to get beaten up. They had both heard horror stories of the toilet bowl baptism.

"Absolutely not. What are you, an idiot? Now shut up and let me focus on my maths", Nishiki sighed, clearly disappointed in his brother's ideas. Kiryu sighed too, turning his look back outside.

The sun was warm, embracing the cherry blossom covered ground. The way the light reflected from this one girl's hair, the sight mesmerized Kiryu. He wasn't sure if he had ever seen blonde hair outside from television and magazines before. Of course, bleached hair meant trouble, as it was a sign of not trying to fit in. Especially so if combined with smoking and wearing your uniform unlike it was meant to, loose socks and skirt too long. Revolting, yet intriguing sight.

Kiryu turned his eyes back at his notebook, struggling to convince himself he'd be able to survive this school year without becoming a delinquent himself. There ought to be proper, well-behaved students, too.

The bell rang, telling the students it was time for the first break of the day. The freedom, where excited others, Kiryu couldn't help but feel nervous. Luckily, he could barely start the entire train of thought of what should he do for the next fifteen minutes, when the teacher already approached him and Nishiki.

The teacher was an older man with a kind and understanding look on his face, although the most eye-

catching feature was the thick mustache, like a fish stick. Kiryu couldn't remember his name at the moment. So many new places and new faces. Trying to pay attention to it all was almost overwhelming.

"I'm sorry to bother you two, but I thought now would be a good time to show you around", the teacher said, speaking with a calm tone. Kiryu felt relieved, and Nishiki didn't seem to mind this unexpected suggestion either. The boys nodded and got up from their seats as the teacher took the lead.

The hallways were packed with students. They didn't seem as threatening as the ones Kiryu had seen earlier. He now felt silly for the things he had thought about only an hour ago. He should've realized it's just was just the few rotten apples that easily ruin the bunch.

"Most of the first year's classes are held in your home class, or along this corridor, so don't worry too much about it. You'll get used to this place in no time", the teacher told. Both Kiryu and Nishiki sighed in relief. "The only exceptions that come to mind are PE and home economics."

They took stairs up to the second level, where there were mostly special classrooms, like the just mentioned home economics, as well as arts and computer science. Probably plenty more too, but no need to go into too much detail, it'd just be confusing. It would become more relevant once the boys would pick their club activities. Which the teacher just now talked about.

“The clubs are gonna start next week. Have you thought about which one you’d like to take part in?” Kiryu hadn’t even realized he’d have to think about this one. The previous school he had attended, well, there weren’t too many choices to start with. It was either sports, cooking, or homework. Back then, Kiryu had picked sports, like most of the boys in his class, not including those few who took their studies seriously.

Right now, though, he doubted.

“What kind of activities you have here?” he asked, hoping the teacher would just give him a pamphlet of some kind, a list of all the clubs and short descriptions, so he could read through it back at home to think about his decision.

“Aren’t you from (a group of passing teenage girls giggling to cover up the author’s cluelessness once more)? Considering the area, I’d say something like gardening would suit you pretty well”, the teacher suggested. This idea didn’t feel half bad to Kiryu now that he thought about it. If something, gardening sounded relaxing. Planting flowers and vegetables, something like that wouldn’t probably attract the troublemakers either. He had had homework of growing some peas in a cup once and it had been pretty nice.

“That could be interesting”, Kiryu replied. Nishiki looked baffled. Why would Kiryu settle for something that boring?

“Do you have a band club or something? I like singing”, Nishiki asked.

“Really? Are you any good?” the teacher wondered. Nishiki seemed annoyed with the teacher’s suspicion. Why wasn’t Kiryu asked if he could even keep a cactus alive?

Kiryu had heard Nishiki singing when the boys had visited the local karaoke joint every now and then, when they hadn’t wasted most of their weekly allowance on sweets and movie tickets. Kiryu had to admit, that Nishiki had a pleasant voice, and he wasn’t tone-deaf or anything like that.

“He is”, Kiryu vouched for his brother. The teacher nodded.

“Hey! Shintaro! Could you come to help for a second? I need someone to help me carry the new cabinet to the teachers’ offices”, another teacher asked. Kiryu made a mental memo to remember his home class’ teacher’s name in the future. He had seemed a rather nice one, not too strict like the one from Kiryu’s (and Nishiki’s) previous school.

“Sure! Boys, I’ll talk to the head of those clubs you were interested in, they should drop by later today”, Shintaro said, as he took his leave.

Kiryu and Nishiki were left on their own, trying to figure a way back to their classroom, as the break was almost over. It wasn’t too hard, a set of stairs down and straight across the hallway, so the boys made it just in time before the teacher shut the door just behind them.

The next few classes had passed by easily enough, and just as Kiryu's stomach was protesting his choice of an unhealthy breakfast of nothing but fast carbohydrates, it was finally the time for a lunch break. Neither of the boys had bento with a proper meal, but just a couple of sandwiches each. Unpacking of all the stuff was only halfway done, and most of the kitchen supplies were still neatly packed in cardboard boxes.

"Bro, can you get us something to drink? I'll pay you back next week", Nishiki asked. Kiryu sighed. Nishiki had, of course, spent his allowance on rock cassettes again.

"Wasn't there a vending machine in the main hall?" Kiryu checked. Nishiki nodded, already digging his teeth into his turkey and egg sandwich. Kiryu sighed in defeat, heading to the main hall.

The vending machine was easy enough to find as its bright red paint and rainbow-colored cans stood out from the otherwise very neutral colored school interiors.

Kiryu could already taste the sweetness of Yanta fizzling in his mouth, as he ordered one can of orange and one can of lemon soda, as he suddenly heard an unfamiliar voice behind him.

"Are you Kiryu Kazuma?" the voice that was deep enough to cause earthquakes asked.

Kiryu slowly turned around, being stiffened by fear to move any faster. Besides, fast movements might've seemed like a threatening gesture.

The guy in front of Kiryu was tall. Ridiculously tall. And well built, too, shoulder's as wide as a set of barn doors. Why he was wearing the school uniform, Kiryu couldn't understand. There was no way this wild beast in human form would be another student. Now that the thought of beast had come to mind, Kiryu couldn't help but compare this student to a tiger. Big and scary, approaching quietly, surrounding their prey, waiting to dig their teeth in.

"Y... Yes..." Kiryu squeaked. His voice cracked. Stupid puberty, acting out in a time like this, making him seem even more puny and pathetic.

Now that Kiryu looked closer, he noticed a large, rusty shovel in this tiger-like man's hands. Was he gonna beat Kiryu up right here, in front of... Wait, there was no one in the whole hallway. Everyone was in their classroom or cafeteria, eating their delicious meals while poor little Kiryu would soon end up being a meal himself.

Kiryu tried to withdraw but hit his back and the back of the head against the vending machine. The pencil he had conveniently enough stored behind his ear (he had unpleasant memories of forgetting his pencils more than once) fell to the floor, creating a sharp sound that echoed around in otherwise complete silence.

The big student crouched to pick it up. Why? Was he gonna stab Kiryu with it? Would he pick it up and maybe snap, no, bite it in half just to intimidate Kiryu? Because this sure looked like a guy who could chew up

an entire pack of pencils just because he felt like doing it.

"Good, I've been searchin' all around for ya", he said, handing the pencil back. Was this just an act of kindness, to fool Kiryu into comfort so he'd relax enough to make for an easy killing?

"O... Okay?" Kiryu said, trying to keep his words to a minimum. Not only he was sure if a brute like this would understand human speech, but he also didn't want his voice to break anymore.

The tiger-like student looked down and burst out laughing. A total nut job, just as Kiryu had suspected. If only he would've had the voice, he would've screamed for help.

"I totally forgot to introduce myself. Name's Saejima. I'm the head of the gardenin' club. Sorry about scarin' ya."

It took Saejima a good few days before he approached Kiryu again. By this time, Nishiki had also been introduced to his club of choice. The band business was apparently a lot more serious than Nishiki had thought. The band even had a manager, and they had coordinated outfits and a couple of their own songs. Of course, as an ambitious person, Nishiki didn't mind any of that, although he had had some disagreements about their clothes. He knew his place as the newest addition and knew to keep his mouth shut, for now at least. Expect for Kiryu, who had to listen to a hefty fifteen-

minute ramble on how star prints are out of fashion and that stripes would be a lot cooler.

But now, back to Saejima. He came to Kiryu during one of the breaks. This time, Kiryu wasn't afraid, although Saejima's presence still seemed threatening. At least he didn't have a rusty shovel with him this time.

"So, here are the club grounds. I know it ain't the prettiest, but we make do with what we're given", Saejima introduced, as he had escorted Kiryu to the backyard of the school. The whole "it ain't the prettiest" was a rather glorified way of describing the slanted shack with a leaky roof and rusted metal walls, waiting to crash down at any moment. The garden, however, was decent enough. It was big, and although the plants still didn't bloom, saplings were pushing from the soil, trying their best to make it in this harsh world.

"It's... homey," Kiryu replied, trying to sound positive. He still wasn't entirely convinced if this big student was as nice as he seemed, so Kiryu stayed on his toes for now. Who knows, maybe this club was the sole purpose of Saejima's life, and one unkind word would make Kiryu into fertilizer for pumpkins.

"That's kind of ya to say so. We ain't the most popular club, so not like we'd get too much financin' here", Saejima sighed. Kiryu didn't know what to say, so he just nodded. "They would've probably torn this whole shack to the ground if it wasn't for Akiyama's gift of gab."

"Who's Akiyama?" Kiryu asked.

“Oh, right. You’re new in here. See, the thing is, we share this shack with another club”, Saejima told. Kiryu tilted his head, as he still didn’t quite understand. The shack seemed barely big enough for one club alone. “Let’s go inside and I’ll introduce ya.”

The shack’s door was locked. Saejima scratched his head, confused. He knocked on the door a few times.

Nothing.

He knocked again.

“Akiyama, open up, I know you’re in there!” he yelled.

Still nothing. Saejima kicked the door a good few times, spouting swear words not appropriate for teen-rated fanfiction.

A disgruntled groan and some shuffling came from behind the door. A boy with shoulder-length messy hair peeked from behind it.

“Jeez, you almost shook down the whole shack”, he spoke, his words accompanied by tired laughter. Kiryu noticed this just woken up student having a bit of a dried drool on his cheek.

“I told ya I’d bring the new club member here today”, Saejima grunted.

Kiryu stood there awkwardly, remembering how much he had feared Saejima just days prior. The furious tiger had shown its claws.

Saejima pulled the door open, and Kiryu followed him inside. The shack was a mess. Gardening equipment lying all over the floor and hanging from hooks on the

walls. A couple of potted plants in the corner, as well as bags of soil and fertilizers.

In the middle of the room, there was a couch and next to it a small coffee table, filled with magazines and empty cans of Professor Pepper. This must've been the other club's doings.

"I'm Akiyama Shun, the leader of the nap club", the just woken up student said. His handshake was particularly firm, and it was amazing how he had changed from half-asleep to fully awake in a matter of a few moments.

"Nap club?" Kiryu repeated, not believing his ears. Sure, he knew that bigger schools would offer more choices, but a club just for getting shut-eyed seemed too wild to be true.

"I know. It's so stupid, no one but Akiyama could pull it off", Saejima said, rolling his eyes.

"Hey! It's not stupid. The nap club is beloved by all!" Akiyama protested, crossing arms against his chest.

Kiryu was just about to ask if Akiyama's words were true, which he doubted. Not like the shack with its one small couch could fit many nappers, unless they took turns or something. Saejima was faster to call out Akiyama's spouting of lies, however.

"The only one in the club besides ya is Goromi, and the only reason she's in it is so she can do... Well, I dunno, somethin' stupid", Saejima pointed out. It didn't improve Akiyama's mood at all, if anything, it just made his pouting even more obvious.

"C'mon, not this again. Don't start this now, not in front of... Sorry, what was your name again?" Akiyama tried to calm Saejima down.

"Kiryu. Kiryu Kazuma," Kiryu replied. Now that he thought about it, he didn't remember if he had had the chance to introduce himself at all.

"Sorry, Kiryu. Goromi kinda pissed off Saejima this morning. But most of the time we come along just fine", Akiyama explained, sparing a rude glance towards Saejima, as a sign to bury the war axe for now. This girl, Goromi, seemed to be a touchy subject, so Kiryu skipped asking the details. He'd meet her later, probably, considering she was a member of the nap club. Kiryu had to wonder, why would a girl want to spend time in a place like this. It was a mess, and a stupid club to begin with. There was no way a girl would seek a club like this. Not unless she'd be some kind of delinquent. Kiryu hoped this wouldn't be the case.

Kiryu's and Nishiki's first week of school was coming to its end. It had been a pleasant one, although Kiryu was still sort of sad he had made no new friends. In fact, he didn't even remember most of his classmates' names yet. Well, at least he had gotten to know his club's adviser and adviser from the other club sharing the room. They seemed like decent folk, looking past the fact Saejima was big and scary, Akiyama had a bad case of insomnia and Goromi sounded like nothing but trouble.

Friday, the last day of the school week, Kiryu was running late. Halfway through the journey to school, he had realized he had forgotten his literature books at home, so he had to go pick them up. Nishiki, in fear of getting scolded, decided to head to school ahead. Kiryu knew the route to school well enough by now, so he didn't mind his brother standing him up.

The morning would've been pretty if it wasn't for the hurry. Cherry blossom leaves falling from trees, almost like pink confetti, covering the pathway in sweet colors. The river nearby sang its cheery little song, accompanying the birds' mating calls.

Lost in his thoughts, Kiryu hadn't paid all that much attention to anything else but the scenery surrounding him. Only the sudden yelling brought him back to this reality.

"Alright, give us your lunch money or we'll beat you up!" an angry student shouted. Kiryu turned his head and recognized the uniform, as it was the same he wore. The thug wasn't talking to him, but threatening another student. A girl.

"Just try me, ya cowards", the threatened girl said back. She didn't seem to be afraid. If anything, bullies' anger just fueled her rage. Judging by the uniform, she was also a student at the same school.

Whatever this was about, Kiryu couldn't leave the girl helpless. Deep down he knew that he'd be one against five, but before he could think this through

rationally, his body had moved on its own, rushing to aid this damsel in distress.

Everyone stood still, eyeing at Kiryu after his well-intended charge attack to the scene of the shakedown. Kiryu's throat was dry as a rice cracker with mustard, and the adrenaline was rushing through his body. He felt like a superhero, even when all he did was just something anyone with a bit of guts and kindness would've done.

"Leave her alone", Kiryu said, loud and clear. The bullies looked at him, amused expressions on their faces.

"What, you her boyfriend or something?" the main bully, the biggest and fattest of them asked. The others laughed, shouting words of acceptance and encouragement.

"No, I just... I..." Kiryu started, but suddenly he didn't find words anymore. The bullies laughed again.

"Not like weakling like you would be attractive to anyone", one of the minor bullies shouted from the back. The rest cackled at this. Kiryu, still at a loss of words just stood there his arms wide, protecting the girl he didn't even know.

As the bullies realized Kiryu would not budge, they had a quick strategic discussion by whispers on how to proceed. The conclusion must've been that backing off now would make them the weak ones, wimps with empathy, sympathy, whatever was the fancy word for the general lack of balls. So they pursued an attack.

There were five of the bullies and only one Kiryu. He knew he had no chance for victory here, but he knew that this was the right thing to do. It gave him the strength to endure what was about to happen. Two of the bullies held him steady, each from one arm as the leader threw a couple of punches to Kiryu's midsection to test his dedication. Kiryu tried to keep a straight face. He flexed his abs, trying to withstand the pain.

"Ooh, acting tough?" one of the two who were just watching, taunted. Kiryu tried to spit in his face. Saliva had a hint of blood's rustiness to it.

"That's it, you're gonna die!" the just spat on guy roared, running towards Kiryu and punching him straight to the face. For a second, Kiryu was pretty sure he'd black out, but somehow he could handle the pain, barely though. He didn't see properly with his right eye.

"Leave him alone!" the girl screamed, slapping the main bully on the cheek with an open hand. The slap was so sharp, so strong, it echoed in the air, stopping everything for a second that felt like an hour.

"You're pathetic. Both of you. Let's go boys, they're not worth it", the main bully sighed, rolling his eyes, waving his arm to gather his flock to continue their way to school, probably to cause more havoc somewhere else. The two bullies holding Kiryu down let go of him, dropping him on the ground on his butt. Ouch.

It took Kiryu a few moments to gather himself, both from the pain and the adrenaline crash. He felt shaky. He wiped his face and saw blood on his hand. This

reminded Kiryu to check on the girl, to see that she had remained unharmed.

“Not like I needed your help, y’know”, she said, as their eyes met. She sounded annoyed. The deep shade of red on her face told a whole another story, although Kiryu was way too clueless to fully understand that this girl was a major case of tsundere right now. If something, he thought the girl was ashamed of ending up in a situation like that.

“Sorry”, Kiryu muttered back, upset that he had upset the girl. “Are you okay?” “Why the fuck are ya worryin’ about me? You’re bleedin’ if ya didn’t notice”, she snapped. Her red lips were turned into a frown.

“It’s just a scratch”, Kiryu muttered an obvious lie. He was badly hurt.

“Bullshit. If I wouldn’t’ve intervened, ya would’ve ended up lookin’ like me”, she called Kiryu out whilst briefly examining his eye that was bleeding a bit. Kiryu only now realized, inspecting the girl’s face, that she must’ve had her share of fights, as an eyepatch covered her left eye.

“Go see a nurse, will ya?” she asked, going through her bag and handing Kiryu a pack of napkins. He took one immediately. At first, he didn’t even notice that there were printed geckos, snakes, and other reptiles along the edges. What was it with girls and the need for everything to be cute, from pencils and erasers to hair clips and umbrellas? Wasn’t it good enough that things worked?

“Thank you”, Kiryu said, as he looked up to thank the girl, but she was already gone. At first, he thought why had she fled, but then he remembered he was running late to school himself already. He knew the teacher would probably be furious, after all, it was obvious Kiryu had been in a fight. He’d just have to explain the situation and hope for the best. After that, of course, report the bullies to authorities. And if there was still time, maybe go to the school nurse for a quick fix-up...

“Kiryu, what the heck?” Nishiki asked Kiryu during their first break. Kiryu had decided to skip the first class altogether, as he was so late he wouldn’t have probably gotten in anyway. Whilst killing the time, he had done the things he had planned to. The school nurse gave him a cold bag to hold against his eye and a painkiller, but not that she could’ve done much else, but preach how violence is never the answer.

“There was this girl who-,” Kiryu started his story.

“Yeah, I saw it,” Nishiki interrupted his brother.

“Really? Then what’s the problem?” Kiryu asked. He just couldn’t understand why Nishiki seemed so disappointed. And even more so, Kiryu couldn’t wrap his mind around on how Nishiki could’ve seen the fight, if he had headed to school ahead of him, and had still somehow made it into class in time. Before Kiryu could ask about this impossible timeline, Nishiki spoke again.

“By the looks of her, that girl is nothing but trouble.”

Now that Nishiki had mentioned it, Kiryu realized he had paid little attention to this girl’s looks at the time of

the action. Thinking back, really rubbing those brain cells together, Kiryu remembered the girl looking like one of those tougher girls who took no shit from anyone. She had been taller than Kiryu, and although her uniform, the long skirt, and the short-cropped shirt didn't show much, she seemed strong enough to handle herself in a threatening situation like that. She had had heavy make up... And golden, bleached hair...

Only now Kiryu could put one and one together. That girl must have been the same one, as he saw on his first day, one of those delinquents going for smokes in the middle of the morning class.

But somehow, Kiryu couldn't bring himself to regret saving the girl. So far he hadn't met a person who would've been completely rotten inside. No, the only thing he regretted was when realized he hadn't had the time to ask for her name. Kiryu wanted to thank her for saving him. Who knows how long the beat-up would've lasted without her interference. He could only hope to cross paths with her again...

## EPISODE 2

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Pay the price for your paradise

The soil felt warm around Kiryu's fingers, as his hands dug in deeper into the ground. It was a beautiful, sunny morning. The birds were chirping, as well as cicadas. In a day as pretty as this, it was relaxing, planting the saplings of a new life. The day they would finally bloom as elegant as the other trees around the club grounds, Kiryu would be already an adult man, with a steady job and pretty wife, maybe a child or two. But that something would remain here, something concrete. The thought was beautiful, soothing somehow.

The words that woke him from his thoughts were not that beautiful. Someone was furious.

"Where the fuck did I lose my keys?" spoke the voice. Kiryu was sure the voice was familiar. There were a series of other sounds, a rustling of books and papers in a bag, and footsteps approaching fast. Kiryu barely had the time to look up, when the cause of these noises had bumped into him.

Kiryu fell to the ground on his back. He had barely time to realize what had just happened, before the angry voice continued.

"Watch where you're lazin' off, ya lil' dipshit!"

Their eyes met, as the other person, awkwardly enough, had crashed on top of Kiryu. It felt almost as if everything froze for the time being, as he was pinned down. The person was resting upon their arms. Kiryu was sure he knew had met with this person before. No doubt about it, he could never forget a face like this. This girl, she looked threatening, with her long bleached hair, uniform with rolled-up sleeves, an eyepatch, and a strong, displeasing smell of cigarette on her breath as she spoke her fury-filled words.

"Aren't you the girl from the other day?" Kiryu finally managed to ask.

The girl must've realized it too, that this boy was her knight in shining armor from before, as the anger quickly turned into a mix of blush and discomfort.

"The girl'? I have a name y'know..." she mumbled, looking away to hide her feelings of embarrassment. Her

tough girl act with rude words spoke against her sudden tsundereism, as whenever she was left alone with Kiryu in a situation like this, she seemed to struggle to stay threatening.

“You never introduced yourself, actually”, Kiryu pointed out. The red shade on the girl’s cheeks deepened if such a thing was even possible. The tone was almost comparable to tomatoes, which would grow just a few steps away from them in a matter of weeks.

Kiryu never got to hear the girl’s name, at least, not from herself. A loud roar interrupted their discussion.

“Goromi, what the fuck are ya doin’?”

It was Saejima, and he seemed both frenzied and surprised at the same time. Mostly the first one.

This girl, apparently the very Goromi Kiryu had heard only a passing mention before, looked up, then down, then up again, realizing how bad this situation looked. Goromi hurried back to a standing position, dusting the dirt off from her uniform, but it was no use. It was stained and desperately in need of a wash.

“I fell...” she sighed, looking down, frowning her ruined uniform.

“Right... I’ve been kind enough with ya, but if ya go bullyin’ my friends, I’m gonna have to beat some sense into ya”, Saejima threatened. For one reason or another, Goromi seemed more amused than threatened. Whatever the story was between these two, Kiryu didn’t know. What he knew was he couldn’t stand someone being treated badly just because the fault was of his own.

“She’s not lying. She didn’t notice me when I crouching”, Kiryu interrupted the heated staring contest between those two.

“Okay, I guess I’ll let this slip for now. By the way, I gotta talk to you about somethin’ once you’re done with the plantin’. Need help?” Saejima spoke.

Kiryu looked at the plantation. He was almost done with, after all, he had been at it quite a while before Goromi ran into him.

“I’m fine, thanks”, Kiryu told. Saejima nodded, eyeing at the saplings Kiryu had placed. He seemed to be rather impressed with Kiryu’s hard labor.

“You’re better at this than I expected. I’ll go let Goromi in, we’ll talk after that”, Saejima said, leaving Kiryu to finish his work.

It took Kiryu only several minutes to finish with the plants. He headed back to the shack. As he was reaching for the door handle, he abruptly stopped, as he heard an intense argument from behind the door. Kiryu knew, of course, that it was rude to eavesdrop. He wasn’t too keen on the idea of interrupting them either, as the discussion seemed rather heated.

“It’s none of your business, I keep tellin’ ya!” Goromi screamed.

“It sure is if ya keep usin’ this shack, my place, as your hideout”, Saejima tried to convince.

“Your place? If it wasn’t for Akiyama, this place would’ve been blasted to smithereens!” Goromi let out a burst of offended laughter.

"Hey, keep me out of this", a muffled mumble from Akiyama could be heard. He must've been trying to take a quick nap before school began. Why he wouldn't just sleep late back at his own place, Kiryu wasn't sure.

"See? Even Akiyama doesn't want any part in this... this thing of yours!" Saejima continued.

"Hey, I never sa-" Akiyama tried to interrupt, but it was too late. Goromi opened her mouth once more.

"Fine. Fuck ya. Fuck ya both. Fuck everythin'!" she screeched. A door slammed open, and Goromi stomped out from the shack. Kiryu could barely dodge the door that swung open with such force.

"H... Hi," Kiryu said shyly to Goromi. Not that he was nervous because of this girl, nothing like that. She just seemed so frantic that Kiryu was afraid for his own safety. Whether it was smart to speak to her in the first place, Kiryu doubted it, but the words had kind of escaped from his mouth.

"Fuck y... No, not ya. Just... Just shut up for now, please", she said, speaking as calmly as she could for the time being. Kiryu looked after Goromi as she marched away, hoping she would be okay. Whatever this all was about, Kiryu had to admit he had no clue.

He stepped into the shack. Saejima leaned against the wall, facing it, hanging his head heavily. It seemed he was just seconds away from snapping. It was probably for the best that he had such good self-restraint. A good whack from him would crumble down the fragile walls. Akiyama sat on the couch, still covered in a blanket, as

he had just woken up because of the disagreement he was pulled in.

"Saejima, you wanted to talk? Is now a good time or should I come back later?" Kiryu checked, trying to be as polite and non-hostile as possible. Saejima turned towards Kiryu.

"Yeah" he said. "Akiyama, could you leave for a second?" Akiyama groaned in protest, but knew that it was for the best if he'd just do as he was told for the time being. Maybe a can of coffee drink would wake him up properly, ready him to face the challenges of the upcoming day.

As soon as Akiyama had left, Saejima placed his large, shovel-sized hand on Kiryu's shoulder. Kiryu swallowed anxiously. He knew by now that Saejima wasn't a bad guy, but something about him still seemed threatening. Probably the size.

"Listen, Kiryu, I just wanna say... Thanks for protectin' her", Saejima spoke with a peculiarly soft voice. Kiryu hadn't expected this, and truth to be told, he wasn't sure what Saejima had meant by this. The confused look in his eyes and the tilted head told Saejima that Kiryu wasn't really following.

"Don't tell me they gave ya enough beatin' to give ya amnesia?" Saejima asked, sounding worried. Beating? Oh! Now Kiryu understood.

"You mean the last Friday?" he inquired, just to make sure. Saejima nodded.

“I was out there myself, watchin’ some birds. I didn’t mean to spy on her, not when there is a pair of egg-layin’ bushtits! The less I know about her business, the better. I just heard her screamin’, had to check if she was okay. I know well enough she can handle herself in a fight, four or five guys is nothin’”, Saejima began speaking. Kiryu was still left puzzled by just how badass of a girl this Goromi really was, if five guys were nothing. Kiryu didn’t have much time to ponder upon those thoughts, as Saejima continued.

“I was about to look away, but then ya came. As far as I know, no one’s helped her before like ya did. It was stupid of ya, really. Stupid, but brave”, Saejima said. Sure enough, Kiryu’s right eye still was black and more than a bit swollen, but other than that, he felt fine enough, especially knowing he had done the right thing.

“If it wasn’t for her, I might’ve ended up with broken bones or more serious injuries. She was the one who made the bullies go away. I just couldn’t help it, you know, helping her. My body acted on its own”, Kiryu tried to explain himself. Now that Saejima had called him out on his actions, Kiryu knew just how desperate his attempt had been. Saving a delinquent girl, a head taller than you, clearly capable of handling the situation on her own, from a group of bullies... Silly idea, really.

“I know she appreciated your effort”, Saejima told, smiling gently. Kiryu had a hard time believing his words.

“Are you sure? She doesn’t seem too happy when talking with me”, Kiryu told. Not that Kiryu minded it too much, but of course it hurt him a little every time they interacted, he just got called names and ridiculed.

“Yeah, trust me. No one’s ever been as nice to her as ya. She’s just puttin’ up with the tough girl act ‘cause she doesn’t know how to react”, Saejima explained.

“Are you really sure?” Kiryu asked yet again. He didn’t quite understand why someone would mask their confusion with a cocky attitude, but then again, Kiryu was a country kid with non-existent experience with teenage city girls. Besides, he realized by now that Saejima knew Goromi very well, better than Kiryu at least, which wasn’t much of a feat at this point.

“Just... Just don’t be too nice to her, or she’ll fall for ya. She’s a nice person, but a bad influence, y’know what I mean?” Saejima warned. He looked as if he was about to say a lot more, but a knock on the door interrupted them. It was Akiyama, coming back with a few cans of various beverages. He had picked a can of cold-brewed coffee for himself, Kiryu and Saejima were to choose between Yanta and Prof. Pepper. Kiryu opted for the latter, as he had never tasted it before. Seeing the cans in the club room had gotten him curious enough to give it a taste. The taste was crisp, kind of the same as your average cola, mixed in with aromas of... maybe cherry and bitter almond? It was hard to pinpoint. But Kiryu totally saw the appeal of the drink.

“Thank you”, he said to Akiyama, before heading to school. The first class would start in fifteen minutes, so he was hoping to meet up with Nishiki so they could go to the classroom together.

The first class had barely ended when a fellow classmate approached Kiryu. This boy had trouble written all over his face, framed by bleached pompadour that was defying all rules of gravity. Was he possibly one of the thugs there on Friday’s fight? No, Kiryu didn’t remember seeing his face there. Then again, he got beaten quite hard, so one of the punches might’ve caused him temporary amnesia, strong enough to forget one person’s face. No. This guy seemed so different from anyone else, Kiryu would’ve remembered that face and that ridiculous haircut.

Nishiki, seated next to Kiryu, did his best to show his rude face. It wasn’t too convincing.

“Are you the wimp who beat up the Dust Devils?” the scary-looking student inquired, not even bothering with the introductions.

Kiryu did not understand what this was about. He knew nothing about the ‘Dust Devils’, other than it sounded like a gang of some sort. This student sure looked like a gang member with a scar near his mouth and a uniform with ripped-off sleeves. His toned arms made Kiryu hesitant to answer. One wrong word and he’d be just a bit closer to the second date with the school’s nurse within a week.

“I’m not sure if I follow”, Kiryu said, hoping his status as a new student would give him the benefit of doubt on his side.

“Don’t bullshit me”, the student said, leaning against Kiryu’s desk. Kiryu worried it would fall over from the sheer size and strength of the thug.

“Bro, I think he’s referring to Friday”, Nishiki whispered his suggestion to Kiryu.

“That’s right”, the student nodded. How did even Nishiki know more about everything going on here than Kiryu?

“Sorry, I didn’t know they were your frie-” Kiryu started, but the student’s roaring laughter interrupted this act of apology.

“My friends? Dude, they’re real assholes. About a fuckin’ time someone did somethin’ to ‘em. You have balls of steel! Beatin’ them up without a second thought, and you didn’t even know they’re like the most influential gang here”, he kept praising Kiryu.

“I didn’t do it for fun. This girl, I think her name was Goromi, was attacked by them. I just wanted to save her”, Kiryu corrected right away. The last thing he needed was this dishonorable badge of a gang destroyer shining on his chest. He saw the wise beyond Saejima’s words, that getting too friendly with Goromi was only gonna give more trouble.

And Kiryu hated how he had to be proven right immediately.

“Goromi?! Are you sure? Look, I appreciate the effort, but keep your hands off from my girl from now on or I will get angry”, the student threatened, looking into Kiryu’s eyes with a weird, possessive gaze suddenly.

This was a man Kiryu did not want to throw arms with, so he made up a white lie about needing to go to the bathroom to escape the troublesome situation. Nishiki joined his brother, saying the hallways were impossible to navigate alone just yet.

Almost as soon as they had made their way out of hearing distance, Nishiki started his lecture, built on words of brotherly caring and a bit of jealousy, as Nishiki had yet failed to make such an impact on his classmates as Kiryu had. Other than his cunning looks and joining of the band club, there was nothing that would’ve made him stood out the slightest. He was shy, about the average grades, and no striking personality to interest people.

“If I wouldn’t have been there as a witness, who knows if he would’ve actually torn you apart”, Nishiki started with the good old bait of having a reliable friend around in the time of need.

“He didn’t have any reason for that. I get that he’s jealous, but all I did was to save her. She even left the scene on her own, not like I carried her to the nurse or something”, Kiryu defended himself. “Thanks for sticking by, anyway.”

“Yeah, that would’ve been stupid. So, are you starting to regret?” Nishiki asked, pleased by Kiryu’s last phrase.

“Kinda. But given the change, I wouldn’t have done any different, even if I knew it’d lead to this”, Kiryu admitted, internally cursing his righteousness.

“I should’ve guessed you’d say something like that...” Nishiki sighed, but couldn’t hide his genuine smile. Even if Kiryu was a fool, he was still a brilliant brother and had been there for Nishiki when he had needed it the most. “Just don’t count on that I’d be around the next time when Goda Ryuji & the Gang come for you to avenge on behalf of his jealousy.”

“Alright, gotta remember that name so I know who to avoid if I end up saving more damsels in distress”, Kiryu joked. He was about to ask Nishiki where he had learned the name from but realized it was just common sense to learn your classmates’ names, the sooner the better of course. To be honest, Kiryu had been too exhausted from explaining his knight act to so many people he had neglected the rest of the school life. Well, few more days like this, and he would have probably already explained it personally to every student.

Later the very same day, during the P.E. class, the teacher told there would be school Olympics in the first week of June. The teacher went through each and every student of his class to listen to their plans, wishes, strengths, and weaknesses. Kiryu couldn’t help but groan when the teacher made a joke about Kiryu being

fit for a boxing club, if only it hadn't been disestablished because of too many complaints from worried parents.

"You seem like a reliable sort. How about joining the relay team? We're still a few guys short on that one. It's pretty easy, just run faster than the rest and whatever you do, don't drop the baton", the teacher, who very much looked like he had never run a single step in his life, suggested. Why were there exactly two kinds of P.E. teachers anyway? Those who looked like they even slept on the treadmill and those whose only qualifying feature was a loud voice to make sure the students heard how they were failures for not performing like professional athletes. To Kiryu's bad luck, his teacher very much appeared to be the latter.

Pretty much every student was recruited. There was no sleazing out on this one. Only some clubs, like cooking (someone's gotta sell snacks) and press (to take photos and write articles for the school paper) got a chance to pass. Nishiki was one of them, as he'd perform with the rest of the band club on the mid-time. Compared to that, Kiryu was more than happy to run a few hundred meters. He had already had his share of the spotlight; it was time for him to step aside. After all, Kiryu knew Nishiki had hoped for a chance like that for who knows how long. He loved the attention.

Teenagers, as energetic and full of self-confidence as they were, had so many other things to carry on their shoulders. Som to motivate them on trying their best, the teacher promised some of the best performances

extra rewards. What it meant, older students explained it would mean better funding to one's club, usually in form of better supplies or a small field trip. Kiryu knew the gardening club was barely scraping by, but it was Saejima who made sure Kiryu would try his best, promising to help out in whatever way he could.

Kiryu's dedication was already put on the test the next morning, as Saejima had asked his apprentice to arrive at school grounds two hours before the first lesson took place.

"Good mornin'! Glad you made it", Saejima greeted Kiryu arriving at the school gates. Without further ado, Saejima escorted Kiryu to the school's backyard, where there was the sports field. While making their way, Saejima explained how it' would be booked with sports club members from noon to night, so the morning was the best time for their training session. Kiryu saw the sense in that, but was still annoyed with the early wake up nonetheless. Couldn't he just practice running somewhere else? Apparently not, as Saejima fit in a lengthy speech on how much advance it'll give to know the very grounds you're gonna perform. He spoke of all of this as if it'd be a major sports event. Was it normal to be this psyched about sports day?

"This might be a stupid question, but why are you helping me?" Kiryu couldn't help himself from asking.

"Ah, you saw right through my good intentions. The thing is... It's pretty clear the club's gonna get shut down

as the semester ends. I'll be graduatin', and ain't like no one's gonna follow in my footsteps", Saejima started explaining. "All I want for us, both ya and me, and to Akiyama's infamous nap club, to make some good memories before it's too late."

Kiryu didn't know what he had expected to hear, but it was not this. It was touching just how fond Saejima was, both the gardening and his friends. A sob story like this was bound to motivate anyone, so Kiryu swore he'd try his hardest to see Saejima's dream come true.

The weather was perfect as of this morning, mostly cloudy but sun peeking behind the curtains of concentrated water, making it nice and chill. The red track underneath Kiryu's feet was just waiting to be run on. Saejima approached Kiryu, with a stopwatch on his hands. After a quick set of warm-ups and stretches, he spoke about running. 100 meters, which meant one-fourth of the track. Very short distance, so every step mattered.

"Y'know, I ain't much of a runner myself, but let's do this a few times just to see what you're capable of", Saejima confessed. "Just tell me when you're ready and we'll begin."

Not like there was any deeper strategy for running, just forward your legs faster than anyone else. Kiryu gave his thumbs up, and Saejima started the countdown for the first run.

Three. Two. One. Go!

And Kiryu sure ran as fast as his legs allowed. The good thing about sprint like this was the fact you could really give it your all and no need to worry about getting too exhausted or out of breath. The bad was, however, that as soon as you found the ideal speed, you had already crossed the 100-meter mark. Kiryu took a few deep breaths and raised his head to Saejima, expecting the results.

“16 seconds. Well, the only way from here is up, I suppose”, Saejima told, trying to sound cheery. How was it even sixteen seconds? To Kiryu, it had felt like a blink of an eye.

“Can I try again?” he asked for a chance to redeem himself. Saejima agreed, happy to see Kiryu’s motivation pushing through.

And he ran again. And again. Saejima encouraged Kiryu to really push his limit. Working so hard under the eyes of the tiger, Kiryu felt he had improved, if only a little. Counting the average from all the runs, sixteen seconds had lowered to fifteen point four. Good enough for one day. Now Kiryu’s legs were killing him.

“Same time tomorrow?” he finally asked, after his last try at steady fifteen and a half seconds.

“Same time tomorrow”, Saejima nodded.

If everyone wouldn’t have been so judging, each in their own way, it would have amused Kiryu, how there was always someone who had witnessed the fight between him and the five hooligans after Goromi’s lunch money.

This time, the one who wanted to squeeze out all the juicy details about Friday's fisticuffs, was none other than a rather attractive head of the student's council.

"Hello. My name is Kaoru, and I'd like to ask you a few things about the unfortunate situation you reported last week. I happened to be in close vicinity, but I need to go through the details with you to cross-reference", she introduced herself briefly before going straight to the point. She had a real detective-like aura on her, a fancy folder of black and white photos of students, each looking just a bit meaner than the previous. Spreading them on the desk where Kiryu was trying to eat his lunch, she questioned whether Kiryu could point any of these troublemakers to the scene on Friday.

"I think this one was one of them. And that one," Kiryu pointed with his chopsticks. He knew it was bad manners, but so was bothering one during the lunch break to begin with. His eyes ran through the photos, most of the students being unknown to him. Then a familiar face appeared. Two of them, to be precise. Ryuji, who was Kiryu's classmate. But he hadn't been on the scene. There was also a girl. Goromi. "She was there as well."

"Really?" Kaoru seemed exceedingly excited. It seemed odd. Not like she could've mistaken Goromi for anyone else. "That means I finally have some dirt on her. Brilliant!"

This is where Kiryu knew for sure, that he'd get yet another lecture based on look-based assumptions and

hateful stereotypes. Should've guessed as much. He sighed.

"These five guys had ganged up against her. She was in trouble, all I did was to protect her", Kiryu told, knowing his words wouldn't change anything.

"Sure, it might've seemed that way to you. And it was a brave thing to do", Kaoru spoke with adoration in her voice. "But what you have to realize, is that she is the trouble. Listen, you seem like a decent young man, so I'll give you the benefit of doubt here that you didn't know her well enough, but I beg of you to steer clear from her", Kaoru continued along the lines of Kiryu's expectations.

"Have you ever spoken to her? She's not that bad once you get to know her", Kiryu defended, doubting his words would make Kaoru change her mind no matter what.

"Trust me, I know a troublemaker when I see one, and she's living proof of that", Kaoru kept trying to convince Kiryu.

"Aren't you supposed to be all 'don't judge the book by its cover'? Isn't the mission of the school council to prevent bullying, not to promote it?" Kiryu tried to call Kaoru's hypocrisy out, knowing full well he was now prancing on thin ice. Making enemies with the school council on your second week of school would be a costly mistake that would follow you for years to come.

"Hey, that's not what I... Whatever", she sighed in defeat, preparing to leave. "Seems you aren't willing to

co-operate on this case. And here I hoped you would be different. I will see that all wrong-doers will be punished, you have my word on that. Make sure you won't get on my bad side."

As they say, when one door closes, another one opens. Kiryu had barely stuffed a couple more mouthfuls of homemade curry in his mouth when another girl entered the classroom. This time it was Goromi. She seemed much happier about seeing Kiryu than Kiryu about seeing her. All he wanted was to finish his meal in peace, but stars were aligned in a way that made it impossible as of today, or so it seemed at least.

"Kiryu-chan?" she asked carefully as she peeked from behind the door.

"Kiryu-chan?" he asked, not sure if he was all that happy about his new nickname.

"Okay, it sounded better in my head. Anyway. If ya like me that much, ya could've just asked me out", she said, entering the room.

"What do you mean?" Kiryu didn't quite understand what Goromi meant. Not that he'd even like Goromi. Not in that way. Why would he have? Goromi had a scary boyfriend that Kiryu had only found out about days prior. All Kiryu had done was what he thought any person with decency would've done.

"I heard what ya said to that stick up in the ass kinda girl. I should've guessed as much, that'd you'd have some hidden motives behind savin' me. Must be my charmin' personality and heavenly looks", she giggled,

sitting on the opposite end of Kiryu's desk. Usually, it was where Nishiki sat, but today he had some business to do with the band club.

Kiryu noticed Goromi was a lot more confident than ever before when talking with Kiryu. What Kiryu didn't know was that Goromi was already developing a crush, and her bestest gossip buddy, Akiyama, had only cheered her on to pursue this dream of hers.

"That has nothing to do with—" Kiryu started, but Goromi interrupted him.

"Ya sayin' I ain't cute?" she gasped, pretending to be shocked. Kiryu panicked. He didn't mean to offend her, no way!

"No... I just..." Kiryu tried to save the situation. He felt uneasy looking at Goromi. It wasn't because she was a girl. Or maybe it was. Kiryu had interacted plenty with girls in his previous life in a smaller city, but they had all had that innocent friend-next-door kind of vibe to them. Goromi seemed like an adult woman, with make-up and sharp facial features. Or it might've been the eyepatch. The sole eye on her face had an intense gaze as it could pierce through Kiryu's very existence.

"You're adorable", she said, flashing a challenging grin. She had caught Kiryu staring at him, thinking about his next move.

"You... You're beautiful", Kiryu exhaled finally. Instantly he regretted his words. Not only he wasn't sure if he had meant it. Not that Goromi would've been ugly, Kiryu hadn't just paid all that much thought on the

opposite sex to really think what he'd consider attractive. And of course, Goda was still scary and big. If he found out what Kiryu had said, it would mean a trip to the nurse's office once again.

Nonetheless, Goromi was left speechless by this answer. The red shade on her cheeks was comparable to her lipstick.

Kiryu's vision had always been fine, but his senses were acting up. No matter how everyone had kept telling him that this girl was nothing but trouble, bad influence, and so on and so forth, he wasn't able to tell that her lips were devil red, and that curious grin was only there to lure Kiryu into deep, dangerous waters.



## EPISODE 3

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Turn to dust or to gold

The time for the main event of the spring was here, the sports day, the school Olympics, the desperate try to get students interested in exercise instead of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll or whatever the current fads were. Painfully obvious by now to everyone following this story, Kiryu wasn't into neither of those. Well, maybe a bit of rock music now and then. But the only thing he cared for the time being was to make Saejima proud. After all the hard work he had put into the mentoring, he deserved it. Not only that, but Kiryu hoped that performing well would make people think of him as something else than

just a white knight for delinquent girls. However, his re-establishment of his image had to wait at least a few more hours. The relay race was one of the last competitions of the day, and the school's classical music club (also known as 'the boring music club', the one Nishiki didn't enroll) were only starting out with the national anthem. Kiryu thought he might as well go check it out, as well as the first few sports to kill the time and give something else to think than the ever-rising nervousness known as the stage fright.

Climbing to find a place to sit down at the stadium, Kiryu spotted a familiar face in the crowd. Multiple, in fact. It very much seemed Kiryu had interrupted the gardening and nap clubs' secret meeting. Although, the entire gardening club wasn't there. According to Saejima, there were two other guys as well (but for the sake of clarity and author's lack of imagination, they're nameless and faceless background characters of no importance whatsoever).

"I was worryin' you wouldn't show up after we went kinda overboard yesterday", Saejima greeted, sounding reassured, and kind of sorry, seeing how hard it was for Kiryu to climb the stadium stairs up. Their exercise session yesterday had been awfully exhausting. Well, after this day, it would be all over. Which sort of saddened Kiryu. As painful as it had been, he had enjoyed the time they had spent together.

"Huh? Ya mean to tell me that Kiryu was your mystery date all this time? And here I thought ya had

actually found a girlfriend..." Goromi laughed, eyeing between Saejima and Kiryu. As much as she tried to laugh it out, she sounded bit left out.

"... Hi", Kiryu said awkwardly, not really knowing what was going on.

"Don't worry Kiryu, I don't understand them either half of the time", mumbled Akiyama, who seemed like he had just woken from his nap. How could someone sleep in a hard stadium chair with all that noise around, it was unbelievable.

"Saejima has been awfully secretive lately. Keeps sneakin' out to school few hours too early and refused to tell me anythin' else but that he has 'some secret business'. And he's been workin' out like crazy!", Goromi explained. Kiryu could see how something like this seemed indeed rather fishy, but he knew better what it was all about.

"Sounds to me you're jealous", Saejima said smugly. He must have noticed the terrified look on Kiryu's face, as he quickly spoke more to cover both of their asses from Goromi's awakening frustration. "Ya might not understand this, but me and Kiryu, we actually care about school, so we practiced for this day."

Goromi turned her eye onto Kiryu, who nodded his head to confirm Saejima's words to be true. It was only now Kiryu laid his eyes on Goromi properly. She wasn't wearing her usual school uniform, which wasn't that big of a surprise considering the day. However, seeing her in different clothes felt odd. Even when she was dressed

just like everyone else, she still stood out from the rest of the students. The long bleached hair was in two ponytails as usual, she still wore the bright red lipstick, which perfectly complimented the school sports uniform's colors. The white t-shirt had red stripes on sleeves and neck. Bottoms were of similar shade, the ridiculously short shorts, hot pants to be precise (why girls had to wear those while guys had loose-fitting knee-length shorts made absolutely no sense). This rather revealing outfit made Kiryu realize just how athletic Goromi must've been.

“Listen, if ya wanna keep ooglin’, might as well take a picture, it’ll last ya longer”, she scoffed. Kiryu quickly looked away. He hadn’t meant to stare.

“I just...” Kiryu started. He was about to compliment her for how well the outfit made justice to her figure, but realizing it might end up sounding creepy and backfire horribly, he quickly changed the subject. “Are you gonna compete?”

“I ain’t gonna just compete. I’m gonna win”, Goromi announced, so full of confidence. While everyone else laughed at this statement, Kiryu didn’t doubt her in the slightest. During the almost a month they had now known, it was becoming clearer to Kiryu that this girl was as determined as they come.

“What’s your sport?” Kiryu asked, hoping it wouldn’t be the relay race, knowing he’d probably stand no chance against her whatsoever. Judging from her toned

legs alone, it was clear this girl did a lot more running than just from her responsibilities.

“Baseball. I’m good at hittin’ stuff”, Goromi boasted. Kiryu found that claim easy enough to believe.

“She left the battin’ club last winter. She had, uh, disagreement with some team mates”, Saejima revealed. By the slightly awkward look on his face, Kiryu could tell there was something left unsaid. What it was, Kiryu had no time to question, as the announcement for the football match came from the speakers. Akiyama jumped up from his seat.

“Wish me luck”, he said before leaving.

Kiryu didn’t know what he would’ve expected from Akiyama in terms of sports, but it was not what Kiryu had witnessed during the last twenty minutes. The boy, Akiyama, as lazy as he seemed, had insane reflexes. Most of the game he just stood there, hands in the pockets of his shorts, yawning, waiting for something to happen. And then when the ball neared him, he sent it flying away by any means necessary, whether it was a sharp kick or precise catch to reset the situation. Only one kick to the goal slipped by him during the twenty-minute game, while his team scored five goals.

Another thing Kiryu noticed during the match were the cheerleaders. Nothing unusual in that, but there was one girl, who seemed to be extraordinarily fond of Akiyama, cheering louder than anyone else when he had deflected yet another goal kick towards the goal. Judging

by her lack of outfit and co-ordinated choreography, she likely wasn't even part of the cheerleader group, just your typical fan girl.

"That's Hana. She has fancied Akiyama since the day one", Goromi explained, seeing Kiryu's curious expression.

"Does he like her?" Kiryu asked. Goromi laughed.

"Yeah, obviously. The thing is, he's too stupid to realize it", she told. "He appreciates her but doesn't really know what to make of it."

"Good for him, in a way. Imagine Hana putting up a performance like this just to show her affection and Akiyama would have no interest in her", Kiryu imagined, hoping he wouldn't end up in a situation like that himself, where girl would show him interest and he'd just miss all the clues.

"What would ya do if someone, let's say me, would cheer ya like that?" Goromi suggested out of the blue. "Why would you do that?" Kiryu wondered, totally missing what Goromi was hinting at. This would've turned into something very awkward, if she wouldn't have spotted Saejima coming back from getting some refreshments. The morning was warm, and it was only getting warmer as the sun rose higher up the sky.

"Yo, Saejima, over here! Thanks bro, I was about to die of thirst here!" Goromi yelled, grabbing one of the few beverages Saejima was carrying. Without the warning shout, Saejima would've dropped the tray of

drinks, so desperate and unexpected was Goromi's attack.

"Have ya already burned your face in sun or did ya just say somethin' very inappropriate to Kiryu? Ya seem flustered", Saejima laughed, handing Kiryu a beverage as well.

Apparently the early morning was dedicated to team sports, as the follow up to the very exciting football match was no other than the baseball. This meant it was time for Goromi to show off her skills. Looking at how the team interacted with each other, Kiryu could definitely tell there was some bad blood between Goromi and some other members. Just how bad had things gone back then? Kiryu had to give it to her, she did look rather deadly with the baseball bat. There was fierce gaze in her eye as she decided to hit the ball further than anyone had ever done before. Whether she'd do the same with someone's head who was foolish enough to oppose her seemed scary yet likely thing to happen.

The referees for all the games were mostly members of the student council, and the appointed order keeper for this sport was none other than Kaoru, who Kiryu had had the not so pleasant pleasure to meet only a few weeks prior. He couldn't help but to question whether she was there just to ruin Goromi's game, because she sure kept a much closer eye on Goromi than on anyone else.

“I didn’t know she’s your sister”, Kiryu said to Saejima, referring to how Goromi had referred Saejima as her bro earlier that day. As unexpected as it had been, Kiryu had to admit it would explain quite many things.

“She’s not. Not by blood, anyway. We grew up together and spent a lot of time together. Two peas in a pod, as my old man used to call us”, Saejima explained, his eyes wistfully staring into the infinity of the blue sky and the few fluffy clouds drifting by. From the clues Kiryu had picked up from all the times he had accidentally eavesdropped their arguments during the club meetings, he knew well enough that they weren’t that close anymore. Then again, Kiryu also knew just what siblings were sometimes like. But even the nastiest fights ended up in agreements, eventually.

“What was she like when she was younger?” Kiryu asked out of curiosity. Kiryu couldn’t imagine Goromi as your typical girl who’d play home with neighbors or princess dress up games with Barbies. No, more like giving dolls beheading and climbing to places she most definitely shouldn’t’ve been allowed.

Saejima had a troubled look on his face, keeping quiet for awfully long. The awkward silence between them was as thick as the school cafeteria’s expiration day pudding. “Different”, he finally exhaled. “She wasn’t always like that, y’know.”

“Like what? Troubled?” Kiryu suggested.

“Troubled... That’s one way of puttin’ it, I guess”, Saejima laughed awkwardly. “No... There’s more, but ya oughta ask that from herself.”

He was about to say more, but someone interrupted them.

“Kimchi! Does anyone want kimchi?” a young man with a messy hair, almost like a bird’s nest, kept yelling as he walked along the stadium’s seats.

“Kimchi? Isn’t that the Korean cabbage and radish salad?” Kiryu wondered. While he had meant to direct the question towards Saejima, it was this scruffy haired merchant who was the first to answer Kiryu’s question.

“You’re correct. For half a price just for you! What do you think? Spicy as hell, you’ll be guaranteed to run like there was a pack of Hell’s hounds after you”, he offered, showing Kiryu a big cast-iron pot of red kimchi. Just smelling it made Kiryu’s eyes water.

“Uh, some other time”, Kiryu said, and the kimchi merchant moved along, a disappointed look on his face. Considering how full his pot was, this spicy treat wasn’t selling all too well.

“Well, that was suspicious”, Saejima said once he was sure the merchant was nowhere near hearing those words.

“Ichiban Kasuga”, Akiyama told.

“What, ya know this guy? What’s his deal, anyway?” Saejima asked.

“He just sorta appeared around the school trash cans one day. He’s not around here, that’s for sure”, Akiyama

explained. Considering he was on his first year, just as Kiryu, it was impressive just how well he knew everyone already.

“Poor guy. I guess that explains his hair though”, Kiryu responded. He had chosen an unfortunate moment to speak those words, as the Ichiban character just so passed by them again, and had just heard Kiryu’s opinion about the hair-do.

“Why does everyone have problem with my hair?! It’s not my fault barbers don’t know how to do punch perms anymore”, Ichiban muttered, giving a rude glance to Kiryu. What the heck was a punch perm, Kiryu had no idea, and neither did Saejima nor even Akiyama.

A wave of angered roars woke Kiryu up from his thoughts. A group of students, about twenty or so, were suddenly shouting not only general unpleasantries but death threats to the guy who had just batted. It made no sense whatsoever. He had hit a home run on the last ball of the game.

“What’s that about?” Kiryu asked from Akiyama, the man of many contacts.

“That’s Shinada Tatsuo, the baseball legend of this school. He’s just an unfortunate pawn on the battlefield between the Dust Devils and the Rocking Cockatoos”, he explained, amazing both of his friends yet again with his vast knowledge of things he shouldn’t have known of.

“And here I thought the motorcycle gangs were done for after the incident. Should’ve known for better they’re harder to get rid of than dandelions” Saejima sighed.

Kiryu was thankful for this information drop, as he didn't understand what was going on, other than he was apparently on the hit list of the Dust Devils, whom he only knew to be a bunch of thugs who Ryuji, Kiryu's classmate, despised.

"Yup. It's common knowledge, that they are trying to make some dough with betting business, both of the groups. I heard rumors there would be some rigged games, this must've been one of them", Akiyama painted the picture. "Baseball is pretty much the only thing this Shinada guy lives for, so there was no way he would agree to lose on purpose."

Kiryu felt bad for the boy he didn't even know. It was a cruel world, especially to those with even scraps of moral and sense of justice. In a way, Shinada was in the same boat as Kiryu. And these were some high tides to sail through.

Kaoru, accompanied by other referees, attempted to silence the disturbers of the match. They even threw a few of them outside of the arena because they just refused to calm down. Shinada stood there, both in awe of his own fantastic swing, but also terrified of what he had just caused. This was the last time anyone saw him in the school grounds.

(Author's note: He swiftly moved to another city, got a scholarship to a famous sports academy and was never heard again in this fic because he was not relevant to this story in the first place.)

When about half of the sports were done for, it was time for the halftime show by the rock band club. Kiryu was excited to see just what kind of performance they had managed to come up with. From what he had heard Nishiki practicing at home, it had sounded pretty catchy.

Seeing Nishiki climb to the stage with his band mates, Kiryu couldn't help but to feel sorry, seeing how nervous Nishiki seemed. If only Kiryu hadn't been so busy with running, he would've loved to help, even if it would've been just emotional support.

"Hello! We are The Lawbreakers. Hope you have enjoyed the day, 'cause after this the sports won't matter 'cause we broke all the rules and the World itself!" the band's lead guitarist and back-up singer announced. Who she was, Kiryu didn't know his name, only that she was a literature nerd from a parallel class with straight A's in her report card. Knowing that, as well as Nishiki's attitude towards respecting school rules and bias against Goromi based on rumors alone, Kiryu couldn't but to laugh at the hypocrisy of their act. They tried so hard to seem punk, when in reality they were just good kids on a power trip. Not that it would've been a bad thing, necessarily.

At least their music was honest. From the first power chords and steady synth track behind, it was clear they were passionate about this performance. Nishiki's vocals really manifested the teenage rebel and the annoyance

with the adults who just understood nothing. It was clear from the start that this wasn't their original song, but a cover of hit song We're Not Gonna Fake It by American glam metal band Bended Brothers.

"Wow, those guys can really rock. Maybe joinin' the nap club was a mistake after all", Goromi sighed in awe, unable to take her eyes off of the band, their flashy lights and coordinated outfits with lots of star print.

"They're not as punk as you'd think. The singer is my brother, and he's kind of killjoy sometimes", Kiryu confessed.

"Then I'd fit in even better. We would've dominated the world by now with my skills and charisma!" Goromi announced with a sparkle of confidence in the corner of her eye, revealing she was half joking.

"For some reason, I don't really doubt you", Kiryu told in all honesty. Goromi sure had enough energy to make a full stadium to party like there would be now tomorrow.

"Wanna meet up on a karaoke date some day?" she suggested suddenly.

Not that Kiryu opposed the idea at all. In fact, karaoke was one of his favorite hobbies. Considering he had just recently moved into Tokyo, he hadn't really had time to get to know all the local attractions. He realized Nishiki would probably oppose the idea, but then again right now he was busy rocking his heart out. Shouldn't Kiryu be allowed the same right?

“I’d like that”, he told, as the band bowed and left the stage with loud applauds to send them off.

Sport after another passed, from your typical volleyball to silly stuff like the three-legged run. To go through them all would be extremely boring, mostly because of the lack of author’s action writing skills and sports being super stupid in the first place. One worth mentioning would be the tug-o-war, where Saejima was matched up against three other students all by himself to make it more fair. It wasn’t enough. He won easily enough, making the three other competitors fell to the ground face on. As nice as he tried to be to them after his easy win, helping them up and giving them an era appropriate version of “gg wp”, they still glanced Saejima like he had just insulted their ancestors and ran over their pets with a monster truck.

And now, after the long wait, nerve-wreckingly long for our protagonist, was the time for the relay race. Approaching the running track, Kiryu felt his steps only getting heavier the closer to the location he got. Why was he feeling this anxious, he just couldn’t understand. He was even hoping he would’ve bought some of that miraculous kimchi from Ichiban. Not like this was a matter of life and death, just some silly competition to make teens to exercise at least once a year. Maybe he was just afraid that he’d let everyone down.

*Calm down. Think this rationally.* Kiryu kept repeating those two lines inside his head. What would be worst that could happen? That he'd fall down and not win? Unfortunate, yes, but it was far from a total catastrophe. He had gone through so many things much scarier than this, from stealing candy from Nishiki's hidden stash to some of his more recent involvement with the local gang. If he could move to other side of the country for one school with only his brother to be there for him, he sure should be able to run the measly 100 meters.

"Nervous, are you? Don't worry, me too. It'll be fine", said a fellow runner, whom Kiryu recognized to be the one who'd pass the baton to him.

Kiryu's words of mutual encouragement stuck to his dry throat and the best he could come up with on spot was a cheery nod towards her general direction.

"Alright, get to your places. The sooner we start, the sooner it'll all be done with and we can wrap up with this day", the P.E. teacher grunted. Kiryu had learned more about the teacher and knew by now that his name was Shimano and he was the homeroom teacher of Goromi's class. It didn't come as a surprise that those two didn't come along at all, with Shimano's unusually strict attitude and Goromi's hatred towards all sorts of authoritative figures.

"Kiryu, stop dreaming and get to your dedicated spot", Shimano yelled. Kiryu realized he had just sort of wandered around aimlessly as he got lost in his

thoughts. His place was, of course, nowhere else but at the end of the track. His be his relay chain's last runner. He'd be the center of all the attention in a matter of a minute or two. What a terrifying thought. Well, at least by now there was barely any time to think about it.

"Alright, the countdown begins", announced the referee, who still happened to be Kaoru. Earlier that day she had seemed somewhat exhausted, but now after withdrawing from the duty for few competitions, she was full of fresh energy. Would this have been a harem anime, surely the primary source of this newly found energy would've been sight of Kiryu, our handsome protagonist, whose heroic actions were sure to drive any girl weak on her knees. As much as Kaoru liked to think of herself as feet-on-the-ground kind of girl with strict morals, she couldn't deny the courage of his actions. Oh, if only the victim would've been anyone else than that wretched, trouble-breeding, hooligan, moronic...

"On your marks", Kaoru said, readying the starter pistol with a malicious look in her dark eyes. Kiryu couldn't do much but to stand still and watch the first runner of his chain to crouch down. His quick gesture of good will, the good old thumbs up, never made it to its aimed target.

"Get set", Kaoru continued the countdown, aiming the pistol high as if she was about to shoot the sun down. Even if she would do that, Kiryu would've perspired just as much.

“Go!” she yelled, as the starter gun let out a small thud accompanied by a poof of smoke. The runners made haste, knowing every pair of eyes around were glued on them. Team C, the one Kiryu was in, had fairly average start. Not the fastest, but not the slowest either, as team B’s runner stumbled on his shoelaces during the very first steps. Kiryu couldn’t help but to sigh from relief. That’d even out things, leaving only two other teams to having to worry about.

First swap of the batons went incredibly smoothly. No drops, no fumbles. Team D picked up quite the lead, at least ten meters. Then again, it was hard to get a clear vision, as the runners were now at the first curve of the stretched doughnut shaped track. Quick glance at the audience sitting on all sides of the stadium, Kiryu saw everyone hanging on the edges of their seats, cheering their friends or friends’ friends.

The runner from team D, as much as he had gotten lead during his spurt of 100 meters, lost all the advantage during the second swap, as he managed to let go of the baton too early. Teams A and C were now almost on a par with team D again. Team B kept trying, despite how bad the situation had looked to them.

Second swap done, Kiryu realized he had between ten to twenty seconds to gather his thoughts. His hands had never felt sweatier than they did just now. Heart kept beating so fast it was almost as if he had already done his share of the running.

Looking behind his back in wait for the runner, his eyes met with Nishiki's. Even when he seemed just as nervous as his brother, Kiryu found calmness within himself. If Nishiki could sing in front of the crowd, Kiryu could easily run the brief spurt. Right?

"Here, take this and run like the wind", exhaled the runner, shoving the baton to Kiryu's hand.

It was exceedingly light, Kiryu had expected it to be heavier. It only weighed about the same as an empty soda bottle. He grasped it firmly, knuckles whitening from the intensity of the hold. Now all that was left was to move the right foot in front of the left one, then left in front of the right one. Preferably faster than anyone else.

Kiryu didn't have time to look back, but in front of him he saw the runner from team A. Her dark brown ponytail kept flipping back and forth as she ran with dedicated steps. She was on a left side of Kiryu, which meant she was running on an outer track than Kiryu, which would benefit him ever so slightly.

Just a little bit faster. Saejima had taught to Kiryu, that in a situation like this, you had to imagine an angry beast behind your back. On the spot, scariest thing Kiryu could think of was non-uniform dark blob that was formed from everyone's disappointments against him. Goromi's tears after her hero turned out to be a weakling, Saejima's frustration with never being able to make his club into something big, Nishiki's blame for the wrong sort of friends who stole off precious hours you could put into studies...

“Kiryu-chan! Go! Go! Go!” Goromi cheered from the audience. She was sitting on Saejima’s shoulders (and giving him quite the trouble to keep the balance), waving the red tie of her usual uniform as a miniature flag.

How Kiryu was able to pick up the exact frequency of her voice was a mystery on its own, but maybe it was a sign.

Sign, that this was Kiryu’s chance to show, not only to others, but to himself, that he was so much more than his thoughts of desperate times and lonely hours tried to convince.

The monster of negative thoughts could rot behind him for all he cared for. It was time to get rid of it, once and for all.

The muscles on Kiryu’s legs were burning like he was wearing a pair of burning pants, but he didn’t let that stop, not now. The runner from team A was now just next to him. There was still 40 meters to go. Then 30.

Come on! You can worry about the inability to walk from the sore muscles tomorrow as a winner, Kiryu thought.

“Ooh, it’s gonna be a close one! Team C has gotten quite the spurt from their last runner, Kiryu Kazuma, but will it be enough for victory?” the announcer’s words echoed around dramatically, only to be muffled down by the cheering crowd. Only think Kiryu heard, however, was the sound of his footsteps and the thud of his heart.

And then a snap. A snap from the finish line made of linen. It had snapped in two, as Kiryu ran through it.

While he was busy catching his breath, fighting against the darkening in the corner in his eyes, the crowd went absolutely wild. Especially the gardening and nap club collaboration, who jumped out of the stadium, over the rows of benches and supporting structures.

Before Kiryu could even beg for a chance to recover, he already felt Saejima's enormous hands raising him high up in the air.

"I knew ya had it in ya!" Saejima celebrated, squeezing Kiryu in such a tight hug he was afraid for his ribs and lungs.

"I couldn't have done it without you. Thanks, really", Kiryu exhaled, as Saejima was done with his violent embrace.

"Get a room, ya two... Well done, Kiryu-chan!" Goromi congratulated, seeming just a little bit pouting, as if she was trying to hold herself back from throwing herself onto Kiryu. Which she definitely was. Oh, if only Kiryu wouldn't have been so clueless on how girls showed their interest.

"I heard your cheering. It really helped me out a lot", Kiryu confessed, getting Goromi to giggle just a little bit.

"You know, if it wouldn't've been me holdin' her back, she would've put up a proper cheerleader dance and all", Saejima laughed, earning himself an embarrassed nudge from Goromi.

“You did great”, Akiyama praised Kiryu’s performance. He opted out for a friendly fist bump instead of beast-like hug.

“Thanks. Your football skills were quite amazing too”, Kiryu returned the compliments. Akiyama looked away and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I know I’m amazing”, he laughed, flicking his hair back. “I heard an exchange of words by teachers, they seem rather impressed with, well, all of us. So what do you think, time for some celebrations?”

“Certainly! How about dinner on me?” Saejima suggested. Everyone agreed, the day had been long and exhausting. “Smile Burger is probably the nearest one, how a-”

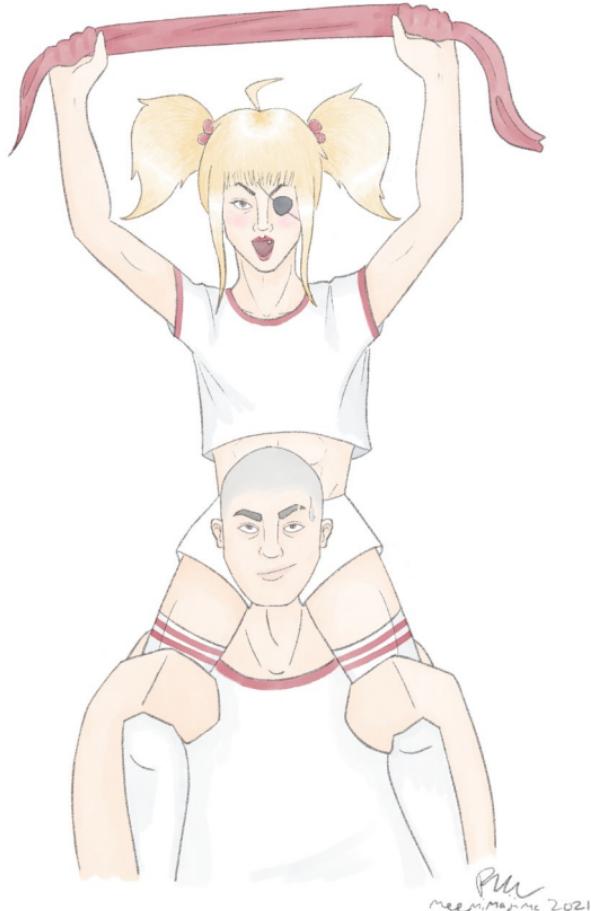
“No way in hell I’ll drag my ass to that hellhole unless I absolutely have to. I’d rather eat dog shit than those greasy turd sandwiches they dare to market as hamburgers!” Goromi protested loudly. Saejima rolled his eyes, but couldn’t fight against the smile on Goromi’s hilarious wording.

“Okay, no Smile Burger. I’m fine with anything, really”, Kiryu said, trying to calm the situation. He hadn’t been to Smile Burger before, and now that he had heard just how bad it was, at least according to Goromi, but that was an adventure for another day.

“Hamburger Monarch isn’t that much further, if that’s cool”, Akiyama pointed out. Saejima glanced over at Goromi carefully, to see if she was in the mood for hamburgers to begin with. Luckily enough for everyone’s

nerves, her hatred towards the food in question only reached till Smile Burger.

For whatever the reason this hatred she had, Kiryu didn't want to think about it too much. Not tonight. All he wanted was to have a great time with his newly made friends, with whom he had only grown so much closer during the preparation to this day. Maybe the real victory wasn't the fastest run or most balls pitched, but the friends you made along the way.



## EPISODE 4

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All bloody and wild

The spring semester was only days away from ending. It had gone remarkably fast, those few months. Maybe just a little bit too fast, as if it wasn't for the overwhelming amount of schoolwork, Kiryu would gladly have gone through just a few more months of this high school life. Not that he enjoyed studying that much, but the company of all his newly made friends had made it the best time of his life so far, despite the few hardships along the way.

Kiryu sat at his desk, trying to remember exactly what had been the most important achievements of

certain daimyo (Japanese word for powerful feudal lord) Nobunaga Oda during the Sengoku period, but the warm breeze from the open window just didn't let him focus. The weather was just perfect; it was such a waste to spend it in a dusty classroom. The clock's minute arm was moving slower than a snail on a pool of tar. It was not only the fine weather that made him impatient though, as he had something much more exciting waiting for him after school. He had agreed to meet with Goromi for some karaoke later today. Goromi was on her third and last year, so she didn't have that much school nowadays. Supposedly it was like this to leave more time for hitting up the books. They had agreed to meet on the train station right after Kiryu's day had ended.

"Ryuji, would you mind telling me why the Battle of Okehazama happened?" the history teacher named Date asked. Goda grunted, raising his head from the desk, as if he had just been rudely woken up from a nap.

"Who knows, maybe they were bored, 'cause I sure as fuck am", he responded, still groggy from his sudden wake up. The teacher very much disagreed and gave a rude glance towards him and his band of allies laughing with him.

"I'd set you up with a detention for that attitude, but I'm tired of seeing you there weekly, so I'm just going to have to ignore that. Let it be known, that I would've finished the class just a little bit earlier, if only you would've told me the right answer..." Date sighed,

turning back towards the chalkboard to scribble down more notes for everyone to write down.

Wait a minute. Kiryu started to remember what they had gone through only a couple of weeks ago. Yes. It was all so clear. Nobunaga had defeated Imagawa Yoshimoto, who ruled over areas which were parts of modern day Shizuoka and eastern Aichi. While marching up his army towards the Kyoto and managed to wipe down a couple of Oda clan's castles. Nobunaga got a clue of this and decided to respond to this with an ambush. Kiryu raised his hand boldly. Given the chance to speak, he bombarded the teacher with the correct answer. It amazed everyone, even Nishiki, who was also low key ashamed of how he had totally confused Nobunaga's and Tokugawa's achievements once again. Oh, if only he would've been as capable as his brother.

"You really want out then, huh? Not like I would blame you, I'm dying for some whis- I mean iced tea. I guess promise is a promise", the teacher smiled, shutting the book in his hands. "Read the chapter 12 carefully, I guarantee there will be a question or two about this in the exam."

Few of the fellow classmates rewarded Kiryu with pats on his back, thanking him for freeing them. Even Ryuji himself. Little did they know, Ryuji least of all, that Kiryu was just too impatient to sit still. No, it was better if they thought of Kiryu as an earnest student, rather than know that he was about to meet with Goromi not long after this lesson.

Goromi had promised to meet with Kiryu at the train station at four. Too bad that Kiryu was half an hour early, thanks to his correct answer in class. What to do with that time, he wondered, before his stomach protested the skipped lunch. The morning had been a hassle, not for Kiryu but for Nishiki, who had spent most of the time between waking up and rushing to school on grooming his hair. Apparently he had taken an interest in a certain girl from their class. Kiryu couldn't remember her name, even though Nishiki had spoken of her so many times already. Because of Nishiki's grooming, he had forgotten his bento at the kitchen table. Kiryu had, courteously enough, given his own meal to Nishiki.

Just across the street, a smiling, bright face greeted Kiryu. No, it wasn't Goromi who had also showed up early just by coincidence, but a logo of a well-known fast food brand, Smile Burger. Without further ado, Kiryu decided to drop by, as he had planned to do so some time ago. After hearing just how much Goromi had hated the place, Kiryu couldn't resist but checking out if it truly was as awful as Goromi made it sound.

As soon as Kiryu had stepped inside, he was greeted by a strong smell of grease and beef. Interiors were very brightly colored compared to any other place Kiryu had visited before. Bright reds and yellows all over required a good few blinks for Kiryu's eyes to adjust to. The menu

was filled with various meals, hamburgers each bigger than the previous entry on the notoriously long list.

“Welcome to Smile Burger! What would you like to order?” a young girl from behind the counter asked before Kiryu had had enough time to read through even half of the menu.

“I... Uh... Hi. I’d like... Um...” Kiryu started, desperately looking around for an advertisement or something to point to, to prevent him from having to say something like ‘deep fried double mozzarella grilled chicken mayo surprise deluxe combo’. “I’ll take the cheeseburger meal.”

“Excellent choice. What would you like for a drink?” she asked while typing the order on the cash register.

“Coco-Cola”, he replied.

“Is Bepis okay?” she suggested, pointing the soda machine, and it’s very limited selection. Kiryu nodded. The cashier handed the soda to him. “The rest of your meal will be brought shortly to your table.”

Kiryu sat by the window with a view to the train station, in case Goromi would arrive early. She had told she had work, and that her shift would end by four, so it wasn’t all that likely. Kiryu couldn’t help but to wonder just what kind of job she would have. He couldn’t really imagine her selling pretty rose bouquets at family owned flower shop or sweeping down hallways at a hospital.

Thinking about work, Kiryu had thought about it too, getting something more stable, but he had barely settled down just yet. Maybe after the summer. Currently he

only had an odd job of babysitting family friend's only child every now and then. Sure, he was a spoiled brat, that Daigo, who sometimes acted like he owned the entire world, but guess it was given, as his parents were quite influential in their line of work.

Sound of explosion interrupted Kiryu's thoughts. The bang hadn't been powerful enough to shatter down any walls or cause any severe casualties, but he heard kettles and pans flying around in the kitchen. That, most certainly, wasn't a good sign. Even less so, when Kiryu couldn't help but hearing the argument between employees.

"How many times do I have to tell you to not to leave the oil fryer unattended?!" The threatened employee's words of response were lost under a loud clatter of metal, which was followed by some wet, meaty slaps and hysterical laughter. The sounds of joy sounded familiar, but Kiryu couldn't connect it to anyone, not at this very moment he was stiff from fear.

"What are you doing with that knife? Put it away. Now!"

Kiryu was getting worried, eyeing around if he'd spot a fire alarm or something to cause a distraction to stop this soon to be murder. He didn't.

"It's... magnificent. Almost as pretty as the maker herself, don'tcha think? My mouth's waterin' just lookin' at it."

"I've never seen anything as revolting as that thing in your hands." A sound that followed the previous

sentence sounded awfully lot like... vomiting? Kiryu suspected it was a perfectly normal reaction from seeing your intestines, which was likely the case, based from the discussion he couldn't have avoided hearing.

"There's no way you're getting out of this without some heavy consequences."

"Hah, I'd like to see ya try to stop me."

A waitress arrived from the kitchen. Her uniform was covered in red splashes. She had a tray in her hands, and if Kiryu's eyesight would've been worse, he couldn't have been sure that meal was supposed to be a hamburger. One thing he was certain, though, was the fact that he had seen this waitress before. There was no mistaking that blonde hair and eyepatch. Goromi.

"Kiryu-chan! I bet you're starvin'!" she greeted, approaching Kiryu, with a wide, proud grin on her blood-covered face.

"Goromi... People die if they're killed!" those were the words to escape from Kiryu's lips. He didn't want to believe it, but the screams from the kitchen and the blood stains over her very much confirmed these suspicions. Goromi was a cold-blooded killer. He should've taken everyone's words of warning more seriously. Now that he knew what she was, there was no doubt he'd make out of this alive.

"Ya think I'm dumb? I know that", she replied, unnaturally calmly considering the situation. If something, she seemed rather amused by Kiryu's words. What I don't know is what the fuck ya mean by that."

"I heard it all. And you're covered in blood", Kiryu told. Goromi's sudden laughter echoed around the restaurant, gaining the gaze of the few customers who hadn't left yet. After getting a hold of herself again, she explained to Kiryu that it had all been but a vast misunderstanding. From how she told it, it seemed she only wanted to make an unforgettable meal for Kiryu, if only it wasn't for the main chef who 'stood in the way of progress' and 'disagreed with Goromi's finer culinary visions'.

If the monstrosity on the bright red tray was Goromi's idea of a luxurious meal, Kiryu had to admit he agreed with the main chef's vision. The high tower that bear but a vague resemblance to a hamburger was covered in ketchup and mayonnaise, had ten steaks stacked in between the bread buns. To top it all off, the whole thing was kept from collapsing by a big knife stabbed through it. It looked cursed, menacing, hazardous even. The rest of the tray was covered with potato smileys, which Goromi insisted on calling as 'smuggets'.

"For crying out loud, they're Smile Burger Happy Smiley Potatoes™. That's it. You're fired!" the main chef yelled from the kitchen. From the way he spoke, it sounded like he had been waiting to speak those words for quite some time now.

"Oh well. I suppose I've earned enough by now to leave this shitty place anyway," Goromi sighed, not

seeming too sad by these recent news of her unemployment.

"I gotta admit, smuggets do sound better."

Initially, the plan was to go for the karaoke date, which Goromi had asked Kiryu to during the sports day. However, her hasty leave from Smile Burger had left her with the ketchup stained outfit, as her civil clothes were in the dressing room and she was too embarrassed to go retrieve them.

"I really need a new set of clothes. I can't stand these grease smellin' rags any longer", Goromi said once they had walked down the main street for a while. She knew a mall just a few blocks further, and was more than happy to show it to Kiryu who still had a hard time navigating the downtown. Little did he know, that Goromi had an ulterior motive behind all of that. But soon enough, Kiryu would find out about that.

As soon as they had entered the mall, they were bombarded by gigantic signs announcing grand summer sale. As overwhelming as it felt to Kiryu, who didn't much care for fashion, Goromi seemed charmed. She was already pulling Kiryu to one of the stores, which selection mostly consisted of black and red punk rock style clothes. Goromi scavenged between the loaded racks, every now and then pulling up a piece of clothing, asking Kiryu's opinion.

“What do ya think, would this make my shoulders look too broad?” she asked, showing Kiryu a t-shirt with skull print and frills on sleeves.

“Uh... Probably not. I guess it’d look cute on you”, Kiryu answered. He really didn’t understand the question, how would clothing change the appearance of your body in the first place. Not like the clothes had the ability to shape-shift your body. Right?

“Cute?” Goromi asked, trying to sound offended, but it was clear from her voice that she felt flattered. She placed the shirt back on the rack. “It’s cool, but I want a dress. Pretty warm today.”

While looking for something to fit her idea of a perfect summer dress, she also kept pointing out clothes Kiryu should wear. Kiryu knew that if he’d bring clothes like that home, Nishiki would throw them out immediately. What was the point of buying jeans that were already ripped to shreds, or shirts with swear words so vulgar they’d made your ancestors roll around in their graves? Eventually, Goromi gave up trying to stylize Kiryu, for now, admitting this young man was a lost cause when it came to fashion.

Half an hour later, Goromi finally found a dress she fancied enough to spend her hard-earned cash. From frontal view it was just a normal knee-length black dress, but the back was open with spiderweb-like strings to create an interesting detail. Kiryu didn’t understand clothing, but couldn’t disagree that the dress looked good on Goromi.

“It’s about five. I gotta be home by seven, but we still have time for karaoke if you want”, Kiryu suggested once they were back from the store.

“Nah, we gotta do that some other day. There’s one thing I need your help, y’see...” Goromi told, poking her index fingers awkwardly. She was suddenly feeling quite bashful.

“What is it?” Kiryu asked, failing to notice uneasiness in Goromi’s actions.

“There’s this beach party, y’know, summer vacation startin’ and all, I need somethin’ to wear”, Goromi explained, already pulling Kiryu to another store at the other side of the mall.

“Why can’t you just wear that dress? It’s nice enough, right?” Kiryu said, not understanding what was the issue here.

“It’s a beach party, you dimwit! I need a bikini!” Goromi said, stopping in front of a store that sold just that, bikinis and swimsuits, as well as some other beach accessories like towels and sunglasses.

Stepping inside, Kiryu soon realized he was pretty much the only guy in the store, as most of the other customers were giggly girl groups. Goromi didn’t seem to mind the fact that she had a boy as her company, but dragged Kiryu to inspect a pair of rather frilly, black bikini with red polka dots. It was surprisingly cute. Kiryu had half expected something more basic and daring. However, the thing that bothered him most right now was why he was the one to be dragged along with this.

"What do ya think about that one?" Goromi asked, picking the set from the rack.

"I guess it's nice... Listen, why do you want my opinion? Why didn't you ask Saejima? You two are pretty close. Or Ryuji, he's your boyfriend, isn't he? I'm sure he wouldn't mind help—" Kiryu tried to rationalize. Goromi stopped him.

"Saejima is... Well, he's Saejima... Can ya imagine him in a place like this? Yeah. Me neither. And Ryuji isn't exactly my boyfriend. What are ya talkin' about?" Goromi explained. Kiryu had to admit he had a hard time picturing Saejima doing clothes shopping. Not in a place like this, at least.

"I'm pretty sure he said I shouldn't talk with you, that you're his girl or something," Kiryu told, still vividly remembering the fear when Ryuji had called Kiryu out on his kindness towards Goromi. Kiryu had failed to avoid her, if something, it only felt like Goromi was looking to spend as much time as possible with Kiryu.

"That... That oaf. Alright, fine, I may have led him on, but that doesn't mean we'd be datin'. I'm no one's girl", Goromi sighed.

While they had discussed Goromi's relationship status, they had made their way towards the dressing booths. Goromi slipped into one and told Kiryu to wait outside. Kiryu tried to act as if he was particularly interested in the sunglasses display next to the booths. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to be anywhere near the dressing booths. Someone might have thought of

him as some sort of peeping pervert, as he still very much remained the only guy within the perimeter.

“Okay, come and have a look”, Goromi said, peeking from behind the thick velvet curtain.

“I’m sure it’s fine”, Kiryu replied, very much hoping he could disappear from the scene at the very moment. Seeing his friend in bikini felt like a grand invasion of one’s privacy. Seeing the clothes on the hanger was already enough to paint him the picture of how it would look on her. There was no need to see Goromi herself wearing it.

“Please Kiryu-chan, I need ya”, she cooed, making come here motion with her hand reached out behind the curtain. Kiryu’s face looked like he had burned in the sun, so red and hot all of the sudden.

“Alright, just keep your voice down”, he grunted after seeing few girls giving him rather curious, judging glances. Pulling aside the curtain, Kiryu slipped in the booth. It was very cramped, and there was no way he could avoid seeing way more bare skin than he was comfortable with.

“So, what do ya think?” Goromi asked, flashing a very Voguesque pose for Kiryu. Not that Kiryu knew what Vogue meant exactly, but he remembered a music video by the same name. Goromi’s actions just now reminded him of the said video.

The bikini that had seemed almost childishly cutesy on the hanger now seemed much more elegant and almost... sexy.

No, Kiryu, come on, don't think your friends as sexy, that's totally unacceptable! What Kiryu wasn't able to put into words was how the frills really balanced out Goromi's very athletic body, toned arms and flat stomach. Kiryu felt the tips of his ear reddening. Has it been this hot all day long or had the air condition just broken down?

"Wow... You look wonderful", Kiryu exhaled. There was much he wanted to say, but he didn't have the words to do justice to the sight in front of him.

"Ya really think so? Does this bottom make my ass look big?" Goromi wondered, turning around and striking yet another pose.

One thing was for certain, that Goromi didn't look like those girls in Nishiki's magazines he kept hidden underneath the mattress. Those printed girls were small and submissive, while Goromi was tall and somehow scary, yet exciting at the same time. The scariest part in her was how she had made Kiryu feel just now. His heart was racing so loud he was sure Goromi heard it all. His hands were sweaty, and he felt every rational thought had left his brain.

"Your butt looks nice", Kiryu was able to whisper. "Sorry, I really gotta go. Hot. I need a drink. I'll wait outside."

Kiryu dashed away as fast as he could without attracting too much unwanted attention. Sure, he got some suspicious glances upon him, running away from the dressing booths, but at least no one yelled the

guards to come and arrest him. The way from one side of the store to the exit felt like half a marathon under the dire situation, but Kiryu managed it. The air outside the store felt fresh, and the vending machine serving chilled drinks was a blessing in the form of capitalism. Kiryu sat down on a bench near the store entrance and cracked open his Yanta. No matter how cold it was, Kiryu didn't seem to be able to calm down. What had just happened, he could not understand. He also didn't know just why he felt like this. To make matters worse than they already were, the last functional brain cell told Kiryu to lift the school bag to his lap to cover the fact he had popped a boner from nervousness. It was like his brain was but a block of ice cream, left under the sun to melt, all soft and mushy.

Some time later, Goromi returned. She had an annoyed look on her face that quickly turned into a worried glance upon seeing Kiryu just outside the store.

"Are ya alright?" she asked, approaching Kiryu.

"What do you mean?" Kiryu asked back.

"Your nose is bleedin'", Goromi told, searching through her handbag to offer Kiryu a napkin to clean his face.

"What?" Kiryu said in disbelief, touching his face. His fingers were indeed stained with blood. "I'm fine, I guess. Heatstroke maybe?"

Goromi carefully eyed Kiryu from head to toe, noticing the bag in his lap. Her worried expression turned into a wide grin accompanied by a chuckle.

"If ya say so..." she said, rolling her eye. She clearly hadn't bought Kiryu's words.

They had now began walking back towards the train station, after all, Kiryu still had homework to do, and had to help Nishiki with cooking, even though Kiryu was still feeling full from Goromi's attempt at cheeseburger.

"So, you bought the bikini then?" Kiryu asked just to get out of that awkward silence stuck between the two of them.

"Well, ya said they looked good on me", she told. "If ya say it's good, I'm sure Ryuji will love it." There was the name again. Now was Kiryu's chance to ask what this was all about. For the last half an hour or so, he had totally forgotten yet again that he probably shouldn't have been spending time with Goromi, especially outside of school.

"Why does his opinion matter? I had the impression you don't like him", Kiryu started the conversation.

"Ugh, it's one long ass story", Goromi sighed. Kiryu looked at the clock on the train station wall, then at the timetable. The next one would leave in ten minutes.

"I still have some time to kill", Kiryu told.

"Fine, if ya insist. I had this gang, Motor Mistresses. We were the real shit, all the finest ladies of this city. I rolled with them until... Until..." What Goromi had started with great pride in her voice, had quickly faded into wistful muttering.

"Until what?" Kiryu asked, curious to see what this was all about. He didn't know much of Goromi, and

even most of what he knew was based on biased rumors rather than her own words.

“Nevermind that. We separated around last winter. And I miss that, ridin’ with my girls, causin’ trouble wherever we went. Ya wouldn’t understand, so enough about that. The point is, I don’t have the energy or the connections to start my own group yet again, so I thought my best bet would be to sneak in to the Rockin’ Cockatoos. Ryuji’s the current leader, so my plan is to butter him up enough to get me in his lil’ group”, Goromi explained.

Kiryu would’ve lied if he would’ve said he had understood everything, but he saw the bigger picture behind all of this. He didn’t know what to answer to a story like that, after all, he had no idea how those motorcycle gangs even worked. There was probably some sort of hierarchy, like within all clubs, but by what merits, Kiryu couldn’t have guessed. It wasn’t simply the one who was the oldest, as Ryuji was still on his first year, just as Kiryu.

“Ryuji’s in my class”, Kiryu mentioned, just to check if they really were talking about the same guy.

“I know. Hope ya didn’t mention anythin’ about our date to him. He just might murder ya for that”, Goromi spoke. Kiryu wasn’t entirely sure if she was kidding or not.

“No, I learned from the first time he called me out for approaching you. I was just wondering why he’s the leader, that’s all”, Kiryu said.

“It’s his hair”, Goromi mentioned casually as if he was speaking about the weather. Kiryu must’ve heard wrong, because what Goromi had said just now made no sense whatsoever.

“His hair?” Kiryu repeated her words.

“That’s what I said. They’re a group of yankiis, so the one sportin’ the most impressive pompadour, y’know, the greaser haircut, gets to boss the others around”, Goromi explained, still not the slightest hint of disbelief in her voice.

“Well, that’s really... Something”, Kiryu admitted, fighting against the urge to call this method of choosing the leadership as idiotic. As if he would have known for any better.

“I know it probably sounds ridiculous for a normie like ya. It’s not how I would rule, but I gotta make do with the options I have”, Goromi agreed on the look of disbelief on Kiryu’s face. “By the way, you should try puttin’ your hair up like that too. It might suit ya”, Goromi giggled. Kiryu scoffed. As if. He wasn’t like Nishiki who spent half of their allowance on hair care products. No, Kiryu liked his hair short and simple.

The train would arrive in few minutes, Kiryu noticed. He should be saying his goodbyes for now. The next time he would meet with Goromi would be... In the fall? From what Kiryu had understood, the gardening club and nap club should’ve had a combined field trip, but so far he hadn’t heard not a single word from Saejima. Maybe it had been canceled after all? Kiryu felt a painful

sting in his heart. Not that he would miss Goromi especially, but knowing he wouldn't see her in two months felt lonely. After all the struggle, he had had a rather pleasant time.

There was still one option left...

"So, when did you say this beach party was?" Kiryu checked. Goromi seemed surprised. She hadn't expected Kiryu to ask this question, (although she had hoped him to).

"I didn't say any time nor date. Why? What, ya gonna party with us?" she wondered. For some reason she seemed amused by this.

"Am I not invited?" Kiryu asked, trying his best not to act as if he felt hurt. His boldness was something Goromi hadn't expected. Those big brown puppy eyes, Goromi couldn't resist that, not from someone as innocent and adorable as Kiryu.

"I... Well, the thing is, it's like, drinkin' party. I didn't think you'd be into that, that's all", Goromi explained.

"It's important to be well hydrated when it's this warm", Kiryu pointed out, as the train stopped on tracks in front of him. "I'd be happy to join you there. Just try to keep Ryuji from murdering me if I drop by and say hi."

"Y'know, this is why I like ya! There's so much more to ya than meets the eye. Just find the nautical museum with that adorable dolphin mural on the wall. The beach is just down the road from there. Saturday, six in the

evenin", Goromi yelled, waving her goodbyes to Kiryu who entered the train.



## EPISODE 5

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If they stop needing you, I'll still need you

It was Saturday, the day Kiryu had waited with rather mixed feelings. On one hand, he was excited to see his friends once more after spending most of his summer home with Nishiki as his only company. Then again, there was also a change he'd only end up making a fool of himself. Then again, why would that happen? So far he hadn't caused a scene apart from the incident from his very first school week. It felt like it had happened ages ago, when in reality, barely three months had passed.

Kiryu had everything ready by five o'clock. He was all dressed up and big sports bag full of beach goodies like towel, sunscreen, inflatable donut, and of course, a

watermelon. He also had a cooler full of refreshing drinks. It was still early, but there was always the minimal chance the commute would not arrive on time, or that he would get lost on his way from the train station to the beach which was also very unlikely, considering it was barely a few blocks away.

“Where are you going, bro?” Nishiki asked as he saw Kiryu by the door, putting his shoes on. This question was something Kiryu had expected to hear.

“Club meeting”, Kiryu gave his pre-practiced answer. How much of it was actually a lie, Kiryu wasn’t entirely sure. Goromi was there, that’s all he knew, but there was a likely the chance she would’ve invited Saejima and Akiyama.

“At this hour?” Nishiki pointed out. This was a question Kiryu wasn’t prepared for. He had to improvise, and quick.

“We’re going to beach. Sea shells are rich in calcium, so they make for a great fertilizer, or that’s what Saejima said anyway”, Kiryu told, hoping Nishiki would buy this lie as well as he had swallowed the last one.

“Okay. Have fun, I guess. At least I can hog the TV for myself for tonight, wouldn’t wanna miss the latest episode of *Sasae-san*”, Nishiki said to Kiryu, who was feeling glad he had gotten out of this so easily this time.

When Kiryu had finally arrived on the beach, he noticed there were but a single group of people, all gathered up around a rather poorly constructed campfire.

This beach wasn't what Kiryu had imagined, not by a long shot. It was small and filled with trash. From both sides, run-down industrial buildings covered with vulgar, colorful graffiti surrounded it. The pier by the water had a few planks missing, and Kiryu wasn't sure if he would be willing to take a single step on it.

"Hey, there's someone coming towards us", noticed a guy Kiryu had never met before.

"Oh shit. Minami, you said no one would find us here", Ryuji spoke, sounding annoyed. Although Kiryu hadn't recognized him from his voice alone, there was no mistaking that silhouette.

"Chill, all of ya. It's only Kiryu", Goromi told, waving her hand to motion Kiryu to come closer.

"You mean the dude who beat up the Dust Devils? That's him?" the guy, apparently called Minami, asked.

"What's he doing here?" Ryuji wondered, eyeing Goromi suspiciously.

"I invited him", Goromi revealed without a second thought. She turned her face towards Kiryu, addressing him again. "C'mon, no need to be shy."

Kiryu hadn't felt uncertain until just now. The group seemed threatening. He knew well enough that Goromi wasn't as scary as she seemed, but same thing could not have been said about Ryuji. And that third guy who had had his share of the spotlight, whom Kiryu had never met before, looked tough. Minami was shirtless, had a tall punk mohawk and various facial piercings to finish off the look. There were also few nameless and faceless

background characters who were of no importance and therefore not worth even a mention after this very sentence.

“Hello”, Kiryu introduced himself, his throat dry as a sand sneaking in his sandals. “Nice to meet you all.”

Kiryu searched through his bag for a towel to sit down on the sand by the campfire. Not only he didn’t want to get his shorts all dirty, the ground very much looked like there could be shards of glass or something even nastier. He sat between Minami, who had just pulled out an acoustic guitar, and Goromi, who had Ryuji’s arm wrapped behind her shoulder. Goromi was smiling at him, leaning against his shoulder. Kiryu didn’t understand why he felt like he wanted to start with the watermelon smashing right away.

“Where’s Tatsu? She should be here by now. I’m thirsty”, Ryuji asked, eyeing behind Kiryu.

“No idea. I heard she had some issues with her bike, exhaust pipe keeps falling off its place on those bumpy roads. I’ve tried helping her, but she keeps refusing my help”, Minami told, tuning his guitar.

“I bet she still thinks you’re salty her bike goes faster than yours”, Goromi laughed. Minami didn’t return this gesture of joy, but seemed bitter instead.

“Hey, at least I have a ride...” he muttered to himself. Now it was Goromi’s turn to turn sour.

“Shut up, ya fuckface. At least I didn’t chicken out from that street race that... that...” Goromi started her

counter-argument, but couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

"Aww baby girl don't be sad, you're so pretty when you're... uh, not cryin'", Ryuji said, stroking Goromi's hair and trying to make her feel better. Kiryu knew he was awkward and as charismatic as a soft-boiled egg, but Ryuji's attempt at comforting was just cringe-worthy. Goromi had said she needed Ryuji's reputation, but this was not what Kiryu had expected. He felt like a third wheel seeing those two so close to each other.

"I brought some refreshments", Kiryu told just to make himself seem useful, and more importantly, to cheer Goromi up.

"Really? How did you pull it off?" Minami asked, so amazed by Kiryu's successful trip to the grocery store he just over-tuned the guitar's highest string and it snapped in two.

"What do you mean? I walked in, loaded the drinks into the cart, paid them and walked back home. I mean there were quite many cans so my shoulders were aching but—" Kiryu explained.

"Yo, Tatsu! We worried you wouldn't show up. Not that we'd need you, our boy Kiryu here got the drinks all sorted", Ryuji greeted a girl approaching the rest of the group. This girl, Tatsu, seemed at least a few years older than everyone else. She had a long black hair and on top of her bikini, a kimono with a ridiculous embroidery on the back of a bird with pompadour haircut.

“What, this little guy?” she asked, eyeing Kiryu from head to toe.

“I told ya he ain’t that bad”, Goromi cheered.

Kiryu still didn’t quite understand why everyone viewed him as a hero, but maybe the rest of the group had spent all their money on motorbikes and gas and were now all out of money to buy anything to drink. The day had been hot, and the evening was warm, so it only made sense they were thirsty.

“There was a sale at the grocery store, I bought so many drinks. I’ll gladly share them with all of you, of course. I got Prof. Pepper, Bepis, Yanta...” Kiryu listed, picking himself a can from the cooler.

“Is this guy for real?” Tatsu asked, eyeing Kiryu who was cracking open his drink of Sbrite.

“Oh wow”, Minami said.

“I know, it surprised me there were any left”, Kiryu told. Minami burst into laughter that spread among the rest of them like a wildfire. To everyone but Kiryu.

“Goromi, what exactly did you tell him?” Ryuji asked, acting as if he was wiping tears of laughter from the corner of his eye.

“That we’d do some partyin’ and drinkin'”, Goromi answered. She wasn’t laughing as hard as the others, but couldn’t fight against a grin. The grin on her face wasn’t as friendly as before, but not necessarily a rude one either. Kiryu had a hard time, as usual, trying to read her.

"Kiryu, just what do you think drinkin' means?" Ryuji quizzed.

"I don't understand your question", Kiryu wondered, not understanding what Goda was going on about.

"Did ya really think we'd be sittin' here, sippin' soda, buildin' beach castles and choppin' watermelons?" Goromi asked, as if she would've been able to read Kiryu's thoughts, because that was exactly how Kiryu had imagined things to go. Those judging, amused glances from everyone's direction made him afraid to nod, but that's what he did.

"I brought a watermelon, actually", Kiryu confessed, pointing at his sports bag lying next to him.

"I'm not sure if you're a funnyman with facial control of a poker professional or just an idiot, but we'll see about that", Tatsu said, nearing Kiryu's bag and pulling open the zipper. She was greeted by something big and green, something that was definitely a lot rounder and heavier than a six-pack of Hayneken.

She began laughing. At first it was just a giggle, but then it turned into a mean, roaring laughter that everyone joined in. And it was only now that Kiryu realized he had made a big mistake. No, big was not a word powerful enough for this. Kiryu had made an enormous, a gigantic, a humongous mistake.

Oh, if only this sand underneath him would've been quicksand, so he could've just disappeared into the void, the sweet and loving embrace of the Mother Earth herself. Seeing Goromi so amused because of his simple

misunderstanding felt like a tsunami, wiping away everything he had ever believed in. Why? Why did it feel so bad?

"I didn't think I should've had to clarify that. I thought you knew what ya were gettin' into..." Goromi spoke. Kiryu was too angry, both at himself and towards her, that he missed the sorry, regretful undertone in her hushed voice.

"What are you apologizing for, I can't remember the last time I've laughed this hard", Ryuji said, his arm still wrapped around Goromi.

Bastards, both of them, Kiryu thought, as he picked up his cooler, which felt heavier than when arriving, his sports bag that was filled with his naïve dreams and his towel with silly, childish crab print. Where would he go, he didn't know. It was too early to go back home, Nishiki would be suspicious.

Kiryu ended up walking to another side of the beach. Too bad the beach was so small, he could definitely hear everything, from laughing and making fun of him to every sharp click of yet another beer cracking open. Minami had finally tuned his guitar, and everyone groaned when he introduced this cool new song he had just learned to play, called Wonderfloor. The smell of heated corn cobs and barbecue skewers levitated around just to tease Kiryu, who had nothing but an endless supply of teeth-shivering cold sodas.

To kill the time, he began digging through the sand for some seashells. At least they would make for a

memory, a reminder to never let a pretty smile to fool you. If anything, Nishiki deserved the prettiest one Kiryu would find, after all, he was the first to warn about Goromi and her wicked ways.

Kiryu didn't know just how much time had passed, but his estimation of about an hour wasn't much off. The bunch of delinquents had certainly grown only louder and more obnoxious. For the latest twenty minutes or so, he hadn't had a single clue what they were talking about. Not that he cared about. The only reason he tried to eavesdrop on them was to kill the time. Well, at least they weren't joking at him anymore. Apparently the wood to light the campfire was from the run-down pier, and when they had been too drunk and lazy to tear down a few more planks, they had thrown Minami's guitar into the flames because they had grown tired with the three songs the guy knew.

Another hour of listening to them would be enough before Kiryu would make his way back home. Easier said than done. The frustration within him wouldn't fade away. Every flat, smooth stone he had found had flown into the depths of the sea. This was the perfect opportunity to master the art of stone skipping. After no more fitting stones were there to be found, he had built a shabby sandcastle just to smash it all down.

"Look at that loser, playing all by himself", Kiryu head Ryuji laughing. Whether it was the alcohol that

made him speak this loud or he did it on purpose, Kiryu didn't even care to know.

"Give him a rest already", Goromi said back. "This is all my fault. I should go apologize to him..."

"Don't bother. He ain't worth you babygirl", Goda insisted, getting agreeable murmurs from the rest of the delinquents.

"What makes ya think you'd be any worthier?" Goromi sneered. There was no hint of fear in her voice, only disgust.

"Oh baby, everyone knows I'm the king of the school, right guys?" Goda asked, getting another round of accepting mutters from his peers to back him up. "I'm sexy as hell and my hair is huge. With you as my queen, we could totally wipe out every gang that as much as looks at us funny."

A slap as sudden and loud as a strike of thunder echoed through the air. Everyone gasped, even Kiryu, who for a guy who totally didn't care what was going on, seemed to be to be glued to the conversation.

"Get your icky hands off of me. I'd rather gulp down a bottle of bleach than be your queen", Goromi screamed, fighting to get off from Ryuji's embrace. "And your hair is stupid."

"No one talks shit about my hair!" he yelled back to Goromi, who's back was now turned to him. She was approaching Kiryu, who swiftly turned his head away. There was no way he was willing to admit he had been eavesdropping on any of that. No, Kiryu was now

unnaturally interested in this sort of elephant shaped rock in his hands.

Goromi stopped just a few steps away from Kiryu. She swallowed loudly and took a few deep breaths.

“I didn’t think this through”, she spoke quietly.

“You didn’t believe I’d be this dumb, right?” Kiryu asked bitterly, still not taking his eyes off of the randomly found rock.

“If someone here is dumb, it’s Ryuji. He has no right to treat you like this. None of us has, least of all me. Ya saved me, and this is how I intend to repay it?” she said, crouching down to face Kiryu. Her smile was unlike anything Kiryu had seen before. It was more honest and vulnerable, probably telling a lot more words alone could convey. If only Kiryu was willing to notice it.

“It’s fine”, Kiryu said, both him and Goromi knowing full well this was anything but fine. “I was about to leave, anyway. I have a strong feeling I’m not really wanted here.”

Kiryu stood up. Goromi had grasped him by the forearm and was refusing to let go.

“I want ya to stay”, she spoke with whisper-quiet words.

“Why? Haven’t you and your friends already laughed enough at me already?” Kiryu asked. He knew he was pushing Goromi now, but he wasn’t entirely convinced about her motives for this discussion.

"I didn't mean it. Honestly. I made a huge mistake and I'm... shit, don't make me say it", she said, still hanging to Kiryu's arm like her life depended on it.

"You were so caught up on becoming Ryuji the King's queen so you just—" Kiryu guessed. It had sounded so ridiculous he couldn't fight against the smile creeping on his face.

"Okay, fine, I say I'm sorry if ya promise to never speak those words again. Ugh. I wanna throw up just thinkin' about him. Ya still got that watermelon? I'm dyin' to crush somethin' right about now", Goromi giggled. "However, there's one more thing. Ya seem to be well prepared, so I was thinkin', would ya have any sunscreen in that bag of yours? I kinda left in a hurry..."

Kiryu was considering for a second on calling Goromi out on her reliance on Kiryu's good will, but decided to let it slip. She had apologized for her behavior and seemed to have meant it from her heart. There was no more need for any rudeness.

"Sure", Kiryu answered, handing the bottle from his bag to Goromi. While he was at it, he also picked up the watermelon and laid it on the ground. It would face its doom soon enough. While Goromi spread the sunscreen on her arms, her decollete and her stomach, Kiryu looked around for a perfect place to lay the watermelon on.

"I can't quite reach my back, could ya help me out?" Goromi asked. She sounded amused for requesting this. Maybe she was tipsy from the few beers she had had,

Kiryu couldn't figure out any other reason for behavior like this.

"Okay, just lay on your stomach there on my towel", Kiryu requested and Goromi did just as instructed. She let out a small gasp when the sunscreen first met with her skin, as it was colder than she had expected. Soon enough, Kiryu's incredibly gentle touch warmed it up. Where Goromi thought this was a gesture of flexing just how good of a massager he was, Kiryu was only worried he'd break Goromi.

"Your hands feel heavenly. I could get used to this", Goromi moaned.

"Glad to hear it", Kiryu said, not sure how he was supposed to answer to a compliment like that. "I'm almost done."

Goromi's waist was so slender. Kiryu saw the shape of her spine through the pale skin. He stopped just above the bikini.

"Thank you", Goromi thanked, getting back up. Judging by the shade on her cheeks, she should've asked for that sunscreen bit earlier, as it seemed Goromi's face and especially the cheeks had burned already, they were so red.

"Hey, I just got an idea!" she spoke again, taking the sunscreen that was still laying on Kiryu's towel. "I'll be right back."

Goromi headed to the direction of the delinquents, whom all had just passed out, fallen asleep or left the beach. Seemed she had crouched over Ryuji's body, who

was loudly snoring on his back, his pompadour still standing as tall as a tower.

Upon returning, Goromi headed for the pier to tear down a plank to use as a makeshift weapon, which Kiryu had totally forgotten about to bring with him. They patted a little hole to plant the watermelon in, so it wouldn't roll away upon meeting the business end of the rotten pier plank.

"What did you do?" Kiryu asked, seeing the wide, devilish grin on Goromi's face.

"Just made sure his face doesn't burn when he's sleeping his hangover away", Goromi answered.

"Well, that's kind of you", Kiryu admitted.

"Now everyone will know he's an idiot", she giggled, tossing the bottle of sunscreen back to Kiryu, who packed it away.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I wrote 'aho' on his forehead. When he'll wake up in the mornin', his face will be burned but there message remains", she revealed, clearly proud of her deviance. As much as Kiryu thought that was a cruel trick to play, seeing Ryuji belittle Goromi like that, maybe just this once, the guy had earned this.

(Author's note: 'aho' is Japanese and means 'idiot').

Now that Goromi didn't have her somewhat high-heeled school shoes, she wasn't that much taller than Kiryu. She still had to lower herself a bit, so Kiryu could tie a scarf around her eyes. Her incredibly soft, strawberry-scented hair tickled Kiryu's face, and suddenly he had trouble remembering how to do a simple knot. His fingers had never been clumsier and his hands sweatier than they were just now.

"Is it too tight?" Kiryu asked, tying the scarf. Goromi gave Kiryu a thumbs up, and followed by this signal, Kiryu placed his hands on her shoulders. Her skin was soft and pale, and surprisingly cold. No wonder, after all, the only thing she wore was the bikini she had bought days prior.

"Are you ready?" Kiryu checked before he gave Goromi a few spins around. Nothing too crazy, but just enough to mess with her sense of direction and balance. The frills of her bikini bottom swirled mesmerisingly and Kiryu had a hard time keeping his eyes at an acceptable level.

"Okay, little bit to the left and straight ahead", Kiryu guided Goromi, who was taking careful, dizzy steps forward with the plank in her hands. "Keep going, ten more steps."

"Now?" Goromi asked. The watermelon was in front of her upon a little sand bump.

"Yeah, it's in line with your right knee", Kiryu told, making Goromi take one small step to left. Then she raised the plank high in the air. She was ready to strike.

They both had expected a juicy slam, but the sound filling the air was something very different. A loud scream.

“What was that? Did you hurt yourself?” Kiryu checked on Goromi.

“I think... I think there’s someone buried in here”, Goromi replied, sounding horrified. Her eye followed along the bump on the sand and noticed a head at the end. This head had a shoulder length black hair and face you had when you were rudely awakened by being mistaken for a watermelon.

“Goromi, it’s been barely few days since we last saw, did you forget about me already?” spoke the buried person, who was none other than Akiyama from Akiyama’s beloved nap club, which still seemed to hold active meetings even during the summer break.

Kiryu was about to ask just what exactly was Akiyama doing here, but knew by now well enough Akiyama had the insane ability to sleep in the most bizarre places.

“Good to see you”, Kiryu said instead of questioning this unexpected meeting, giving Akiyama a hand to aid him up. Goromi had hit the poor guy straight to calves, so it was no surprise he was in pain. At least there had been a thick layer of sand between the watermelon and Akiyama’s legs to cushion the damage from the impact.

“Sorry to interrupt your date”, Akiyama apologized, wiping the excess sand from his clothes. Kiryu was sure he saw Akiyama winking his eye to Goromi, who blushed.

“We’re not on a date. It’s uh.... It’s a long story, really”, Kiryu said, not willing to explain the roller coaster of emotions he had been through during these last few hours.

“We were here meetin’ with some of my friends and ended up arguin’ so I thought we’d better steer clear for now”, Goromi said, making this whole ordeal seem so very trivial. Goromi’s bullshitting skill amazed Kiryu.

Akiyama eyed around and saw the Rockin’ Cockatoos on the other side of the beach. Their campfire was now on its last embers and the delinquents were sleeping around it. Whether they had passed out or had the similar ability to sleep no matter the circumstances as Akiyama, no one cared to know.

“I guess you didn’t get the invitation yet?” Akiyama asked from Goromi, who shook her head.

“There’s only so far I’m willin’ to go, and Ryuji’s a major prick”, she sighed, looking at the watermelon pieces on the ground. Ants were already starting to buzz around the juicy goodness.

“Anyone up for a swim? I got some watermelon stains on me and I sure need no more creeps sneakin’ up on me”, Goromi suggested, already running towards the glistening water. Akiyama followed, he was all sandy after his unexplained burial (from what he guessed, he had fallen asleep and some kids had played a prank on him). Seeing those two heading towards the sea, Kiryu joined them, as he didn’t want to be left alone.

The water felt pleasant, after all, the sun had warmed it all day long. Sky was still cloudless, shining in a pretty gradient from purplish pink to orange. The sea's surface that had been flat as a mirror was now filled with ripples after Goromi's daring bomb dive. Akiyama had borrowed Kiryu's inflatable donut, and it didn't take him long to find a comfortable enough position with it to fall right back asleep.

Kiryu laid on his back, letting the sea carry him. Staring at the sky, seeing the first two or three stars blinking at him, he thought that maybe this evening hadn't turned out to be so bad after all. There he was, hanging out with his two friends, enjoying himself without a worry for tomorrow.

The only thing to awaken him from this delightful dream-like calmness was a sudden shriek. Judging by the sound alone, the high pitch and the direction it came from, it was Goromi.

"There's something stuck in my bikini top!" she screamed, covering her upper body, as the tie in the back had just become undone.

"Shut up back there, I'm tryin' to catch some fish here! You're scarin' them away" another yell rang from the direction of the pier. This voice was very familiar, and as soon as Kiryu turned his head, he saw a big, menacing silhouette. The head was shaved short instead of ridiculous pompadour, so it had to be none other than Saejima.

"Sorry. Hang on there!" Kiryu shouted him back, swimming towards Goromi to aid her.

"C'mon, I can't give up now, I think I just hooked a fuckin' shark or something by the size of this beast", Saejima answered. The sound of frantic reeling in echoed in the air.

Now that Kiryu was near Goromi, he realized that Saejima's shark was just Goromi's bikini top. Trying to pull off a hook from fabric while trying not to look in that very direction was hard, and Kiryu ended up with minor cuts all over his fingers. If that was the price to pay for Goromi to keep her modesty, it was worth the sting from the salty sea water.

Saejima realized he was only making things harder and stopped reeling in. Of course, he seemed upset that the only thing he had hooked was her sister's bikini. Well, at least he was relieved to see her in a respectable company for once. What Kiryu didn't know, was that Saejima knew about Goromi's plans to get wasted with her group of delinquent friends. She had done it many times before, and Saejima knew there was nothing to do about it. At least she had finally given up the habit of keeping the alcohol hidden in the gardening shack after Saejima had threatened to dispose of them. Not that he was that much of a rule-follower, all he wanted was for Goromi to stay safe.

After sorting out the fishing accident, they all sat down by the pier, gazing in the general direction of the setting sun. It was barely visible from beyond the

horizon anymore; it was getting more chill by the minute.

"Did you catch any fish?" Kiryu asked, eyeing the bucket by Saejima's side.

"The only thing to bite at this hour is the sea bass. Useless fish, doesn't taste all that good and the waters are just infested with those bastards", Saejima sighed. "Well, in two more weeks we'll be castin' on some fresher waters."

"We?" Kiryu repeated.

"Oh, right, I've been meanin' to call ya about our field trip. Remember, the one we earned with our hard work during the sports day? We'll go campin' to Sameyama grounds in two weeks", Saejima explained.

Kiryu was excited. He had never been camping before, and knowing Saejima, this would be an interesting, educating experience. Somehow it was easy to imagine a scene where Saejima would wrestle a bear with nothing but his bare hands and end up victorious with only minor injuries.

"Me and Goromi are coming too. I mean, when you're out camping, it's important to sleep well", Akiyama revealed. Neither of them seemed as happy about this as Kiryu and Saejima, but guess it was understandable. A tent and a sleeping bag were probably not as comfortable to sleep in as a couch, hard stadium bench, or a random hole in the sand. And there was probably no need to mention that so far Goromi had seemed like a girl who wouldn't have a good time being

stuck in the middle of forest, bugs crawling on her skin and no mirrors to fix her hair and makeup. But it was all just wild guessing. Who knows, it was very likely Kiryu would learn many new traits from all of his friends after spending a few days in close contact with them.

“It’s gettin’ late. How about I give you guys a ride home?” Saejima suggested, freeing the few sea basses from his rusty bucket back to the ocean, as he had no need for them.

“I was hopin’ you’d offer that”, Goromi grinned, getting up and re-tying her hair that had gotten all wet and messy after the swimming. Kiryu had to check a few times her bikini was still intact and tied tightly from behind her neck so it wouldn’t fall again.

“Ya didn’t see anythin’, did ya?” she whispered when Kiryu was close to her.

“No, I swear I kept my eyes closed”, Kiryu replied, showing Goromi her cut fingers.

“Aww, you’re too sweet”, she said. After a quick glance around her, seeing Saejima was busy putting back his fishing rod, Goromi grasped Kiryu’s hand and gave his index finger a kiss. “There ya go, I kissed the nasty bacteria away.”

“It’s possible your mouth has even more bacteria than the salty sea water”, Kiryu pointed out.

“When you’re done with your cuddlin’, follow me”, Saejima said, eyeing his sister and her friend with a rather unreadable look on his face. There was a hint of a smile, but also something similar to a worry.

Saejima's car stood by the edge of the beach. It was a pickup truck. Beside the fact that there was rust and dirt on the sides, it seemed a reliable vehicle. Somehow very fitting to a character like Saejima all in all.

"It's gonna be cramped, but we'll fit in", Saejima laughed, climbing behind the steering wheel.

"I can walk, my place is just around the corner", Akiyama offered, waving his goodbyes. "We'll meet in two weeks. Keep yourselves alive and remember to sleep well!"

Kiryu sat in the middle 'cause he was the shortest one, and Goromi sat on Kiryu's left side.

It was still cramped, all three of them squashed in the single bench of the car, but there was still no other place in the world Kiryu would've rather sat. He was happy, knowing he had great friends, and there would be plenty of more opportunities in the future to spend time with them.



## E P I S O D E  6

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Where the skies are so blue

“Sameyama resort”, Kiryu read the big, red-painted letters above the archway gate leading deeper into the forest. There was a zigzag like gravel path, barely wide enough to walk in. Quick glance to your surroundings, moss-covered pines, rocky mountains far in the horizons and the absence of any sound besides the trees rustling in wind, were all signs that this wasn’t your average camping site for the first-timers. Everyone but Saejima seemed terrified by this.

“So, have you been here before?” Akiyama asked, being the last in their slow-moving line. His luggage was rather modest, and Kiryu guessed he only had with him

the comfiest sleeping supplies he could get his hands on, and few cans of Prof. Pepper.

"No. Isn't this exciting?" Saejima answered. He was the one leading all of them and carrying the heaviest of the supplies. In his back, he had a huge backpack with assorted pots and pans hanging from it (the clinkity clankity was of metal was supposed to ward off beasts apparently), and in both of his hands he carried plastic bags with 8-Twelve logos, full of daily goods you couldn't find in the middle of the woods like spices, rice and flour. All in all, he seemed very well prepared in his plain black t-shirt, cargo pants and muddy combat boots. Kiryu kept eyeing all the patches sewn on Saejima's backpack. This man sure had been all around Japan. Kiryu felt relieved, knowing he was in safe hands.

"I'm excited if we survive through this", Goromi sneered, waving her arms around to shoo away the bee buzzing around her. That poor little bug was attracted in the scent of her shampoo, so sweet and fruity, a fresh breeze in the midst of the stuffy, moist smell of the forest. From every outfit Kiryu had seen on Goromi, this one was definitely the most intriguing one so far. She wore a big green jacket, likely borrowed from Saejima, pink and green camouflage-print dress and brand new combat boots with pink, glittering shoelaces.

Kiryu could only hope those two very different kinds of siblings could come along in here, or this would end up being a very long and excruciating weekend.

The spot that was reserved for gardening and camping club's camping ground for the next few days was a piece of land right at the edge of the forest. Just near it was a trail that ended in crossroad, the path to the east would lead to beach and the western path would take them to top of many of the mountains.

"This resort was named Sameyama 'cause the mountain range has shape similar to shark's teeth", Saejima told, impressing Kiryu with his knowledge once again.

(Author's note: "same" means shark and "yama" means mountain)

"If ya plan to go fishin', just make sure your shark ain't my bikini this time", Goromi called Saejima out, still bitter over the accident at the beach.

"How about we put up the tent?" Kiryu suggested just break up the storming argument. Both of them gave rude glances at each other but agreed that Kiryu was right, that getting up the tent before doing anything else was the smartest move. If it would suddenly start raining, at least they would have a roof over their heads to wait it out.

The first part about setting up the tent was to clear the ground from any sharp objects like rocks, pine cones and branches. That was the simple part, so Saejima left the rest of the gang at it while he himself opened the tent and arranged all the bits and pieces, the support

structures and pegs each in their own piles for easier time during the construction.

“Woo, look at me, I’m an invisible ghost”, Goromi laughed, running around with a see-through plastic sheet over her.

“When you’re done messin’ around, can ya put the tarp down so we can start buildin’?” Saejima asked. He didn’t sound annoyed, if something only amused. “The tarp’s there to stop the moisture from the soil from sinkin’ in the fabric. I once forgot to put that under the tent and had quite the flu as a souvenir from that trip.”

Saejima assigned everyone tasks. He and Goromi were laying the tent down on the ground, while Kiryu and Akiyama were attaching the pieces of tent poles. It was simple enough; the pieces were color-coded and numbered, attach red part one into a red part two, so on and so forth. It took only a minute, so while waiting Saejima and Goromi to compromise on which way the door flap should open, Kiryu and Akiyama practiced their fencing skills with the tent poles, which made for great, non-lethal swords. Kiryu was declared as winner as he hit Akiyama’s pole sword in just the right angle to make it snap in two. Akiyama quickly put the pieces back together, and they gave the complete tent poles to Saejima, who began slipping them in the tent’s corners. Considering his hands were big as shovels and fingers as thick as sausages, he was surprisingly nimble.

“Alright, can ya guys put it up, I forgot my toolbox in the car”, Saejima said, jogging away from the scene. It

was no wonder he had forgotten something, after all, they had brought quite a lot of important and not so important items to the camp, especially Goromi, who would've probably needed additional tent just for all her bags.

Kiryu got up, deciding he might as well try to be as much of use as he could, so he approached the tent still lying in the ground.

"Goromi, could you help me raise the tent?" he requested. Hearing Goromi burst into an uncontrollable giggle made him regret of asking her instead of Akiyama, who had already sneaked into the half-built tent to 'make sure the wind doesn't steal it away', according to his own words. "Did I say something funny?"

"No, not at all. I'll gladly help ya raise your tent whenever ya need", she said in a rather odd tone, but helping Kiryu out nonetheless. It wasn't too complicated. As soon as you gave the tent poles a little push in the right direction, they snapped right in place. All that was left was to wait for Saejima to return, so they could nail down the pegs to keep the tent from flying away.

It didn't take long for Saejima to come back. He handed the tools for Goromi and said she could nail the pegs, that he needed to have a word with Kiryu. Kiryu worried if he had already done something wrong, as the look on Saejima's face was rather serious.

"I've noticed ya becomin' real friendly with Goromi", he pointed out.

"If something, it's as if she's trying to become friendly with me", Kiryu defended himself, thinking the times when Goromi had asked him to help with the bikini or the sunscreen.

"It doesn't matter. It's fine. Listen, I may have been wrong about this, she could really use someone like ya as her friend. She's been a lot happier ever since she met ya. Just... Just don't become like her. Delinquent, I mean. If she as much as thinks makin' you do somethin' stupid, let alone hurt ya, come to me and I'll beat some sense into her", Saejima said, placing his large hand on Kiryu's shoulder and giving him an encouraging smile. "You're a good guy, never let Goromi forget that."

Kiryu was at a loss of words. Luckily, he didn't have to think for anything to say back, as Goromi yelled Saejima to help with the pegs.

Soon enough, the tent stood proudly in the forest ground. Now of course they had to test it out, take a quick nap to see if they could all fit in, and after that was time to start the real camping activities.

Kiryu was the first one to wake up after Goromi had accidentally slapped him in his sleep. The tent was cramped, because even if it was intended for a complete family, it wasn't considered as an option to have two incredibly restless sleepers included. Aside from Goromi's sleep-induced martial arts, Saejima was

sleeping widely, and his snores were as loud as thunder. Kiryu made a mental reminder to ask Goromi if she had brought an additional pair of ear plugs with her.

“I’m hungry”, she groaned. She had woken up on Kiryu’s muffled cry of pain.

“Me too”, Akiyama joined in the conversation. Even Saejima’s snoring had ended. Brilliant, Kiryu had just woken everyone up.

“Guess we gotta go huntin’ then”, Saejima announced, being the first one to climb out of the tent. “Although I dare to assume I’m the only one here with huntin’ license. And even I only have permission to lay traps.”

“Wow, that’s pretty impressive still”, Kiryu said in awe. “What kind of game are traps good for?”

“It’s likely we’ll be catchin’ rabbits around here, but if we’re lucky, we might get a fox or two. Technically, they’re edible, but I wouldn’t risk it out here. The pelts sell pretty well”, Saejima explained. “Wanna come layin’ some traps with me, Kiryu?” Kiryu nodded. He had never seen trap hunting in action, but his curiosity had peeked after hearing Saejima telling more about it.

“What about us?” Goromi asked.

“Ya could start with gatherin’ some wood for a campfire. There’s a couple of books about berries and mushrooms in that yellow bag, and my fishing rod is in the blue box. Whatever ya do, just don’t get lost, alright?” Saejima spoke. Both Goromi and Akiyama seemed overwhelmed from these options, but before

they had a chance to protest, Saejima had already left, Kiryu following in his footprints.

“What if we just burn up his books and continue sleepin’?” Goromi suggested, her laughter revealing she was only joking around. No, she was happy Saejima had something he was passionate about.

Goromi got up and left the tent, walking around the camp. She didn’t have to go too far to find enough branches and bark to light the entire forest ablaze. But maybe this once she would try not to cause chaos. She didn’t want to upset Saejima.

Upon returning to tent, Akiyama was flipping through the books.

“Why didn’t he understand my tent joke?” Goromi asked from Akiyama, who only shrugged his shoulders, trying to pin down the differences between bear turd agaric and brown bolete, two somewhat similar-looking mushrooms, one being incredibly tasty and other lethally poisonous.

“I’ve been tryin’ to get him to notice me, but he has shown no interest yet. What the fuck should I do? How can I make someone as clueless as Kiryu-chan fall in love with me?” Goromi continued her ramblings. Akiyama finally raised his head.

“You remember the mysterious admirer we’ve spoken about? The one who keeps bringing treats to my locker and love notes with some kinda flower as a signature. I

guess you could try that. There's no way a man would say no to baked goods", Akiyama suggested.

(Author's note: Japanese word for flower is "hana")

What none of the readers didn't know before this point, was that Goromi and Akiyama were quite good friends. Goromi was good at talking, and Akiyama was good at giving the impression that he was listening. For months, Goromi had relied on Akiyama's help to get Kiryu's attention, but so far it hadn't gone all that smoothly. Luckily, Goromi was one persistent girl.

"Yeah, that might just do the trick. Hey, pass me the book on berries, would ya?" Goromi asked, hoping she'd get inspired by the local fauna enough to pull off yet another culinary miracle to embrace Kiryu's taste buds.

Saejima's trapping had been successful. He had laid out ten traps all around, and when walking back towards the camp Kiryu noticed that there was already a rabbit stuck to the very second one they had laid out. That way, they had at least something to cook up if the lazy duo hadn't gotten around to anything but bullshit around, which would have been exactly what Saejima expected. So the surprise in his eyes when she saw Goromi by the campfire with cast-steel pan in her hands, was genuine.

"What are ya makin" Saejima asked, trying to catch a glimpse of what was in the pan.

“Raspberry crepes”, she answered with a broad smile on her face. “Found some bushes just across the river, thought I’d make some dessert. How was your hunt, successful, I hope?”

“Yeah, we trapped a rabbit”, Saejima told, showing Goromi the now dead animal he was carrying. She seemed to be impressed rather than grossed out.

“Where’s Akiyama?” Kiryu asked, as he failed to see his sleepy friend anywhere nearby.

“He’s picking us some mushrooms”, Goromi told, gazing into the forest. She only stopped with this once the smell of smoke started lingering around her. “Shit! Fuck! Stupid crappy crepe!” she screeched as she started frantically trying to flip it around in the pan. The crepe had already burned around the edges and stuck to the pan’s surface.

Kiryu could only hope the crepes would turn out better than the cheeseburger Goromi had prepared for him. Hearing the f-bombs drop like it was a wartime made Kiryu doubt Goromi’s cooking skills once again. To avoid any flying cooking utensils, he stepped back and aided Saejima on skinning the rabbit.

“Skinnin’ is not as gruesome as you’d think”, Saejima explained, pinching the skin from rabbit’s neck and making a cut in its furry flesh. The next step was to take the skin off. Kiryu had expected it to be a lot bloodier, but it came off almost as neatly as taking off a piece of tight-fitting clothing.

"The next bit is not as neat, but nothin' to be afraid of", Saejima continued his explanation, turning his face towards Kiryu. "Can ya pass me that knife over there?"

What Saejima had called a knife, Kiryu thought more of as a sword. However, there were no other sharp-edged objects within sight, so Kiryu assumed this to be the needed tool. Saejima used it to chop off the rabbit's head with one strong chop and had done it so swiftly Kiryu hadn't even time to realize what was going on so he could have turned his eyes away. He made a mental memo to himself to never seriously piss Saejima off.

"Now that the skin is removed, it's time to cut it open and remove the innards", Saejima told, turning the rabbit on its back on the cutting board and making one long cut on its belly. Now there was the blood Kiryu had expected, but it wasn't spraying around like in samurai films. "If ya wait on doin' this one, you'll have rotten flesh on your hands before you know it."

"Ya gotta scoop them out like this", Saejima shoved, putting his hand in the rabbit's carcass and [blurred, red mess]. "Pull it all out in one motion, and more importantly, make sure not to cut any intestinal, it'll ruin the rest of the flesh."

"Since this is the only animal we caught, we gotta eat all the edible parts. Some don't like heart and lungs, but I think they're fine", Saejima explained, his hand digging in [blur mess] again. In his hand, he now held three [blur] lumps about the size of small potatoes.

Kiryu wasn't feeling well suddenly, so he made up a lie to check on Goromi if she needed any help. Saejima saw through Kiryu's lie, but appreciated Kiryu's interest in seeing through the process for as long as he could.

Goromi's attempt at the crepes was in even worse state than it had been fifteen minutes ago. The smell all around the camp grounds was revolting, and Kiryu wasn't sure if he should call for the fire department or nuclear decontamination services. Scared for his own health, he headed to forest to look for Akiyama. Maybe Kiryu could give him a hand with gathering the mushrooms.

The main course, rabbit stew, was delicious. Kiryu and Akiyama had not only found delicious mushroom, but some herbs as well, and Saejima had made sure the rabbit was perfectly cut and there wasn't a single piece of sinew, fur or cartilage remaining. Same could not have been said about Goromi's crepes. Not only the smell as described before, but they also looked terrifying. For starters, the consistency was more like scrambled eggs than your typical round crepes you were used to. The color that had came from the berries, the reddish tone, mixed in with the batter made the dinner look like that rabbit's insides. And the taste, oh boy, it was the worst. Not only had Goromi misread Saejima's messy handwriting, messing up salt and sugar, she had thought that red mushrooms would mix in great with red berries just because they were the same shade of red.

They spent the rest of the evening around the campfire, roasting marshmallows, playing shiritori, gossiping about fellow school mates and as the sky grew darker, it was time for horror stories. Especially Akiyama seemed to have a knack for them, knowing few so horrifying everyone was sitting at the edge of their seats when he finally revealed that the forest was filled with ghosts from the ancient war.

“Kiryu-chan!” Goromi whispered, nudging Kiryu to wake up.

“What?” Kiryu asked, still half asleep. For a brief moment, he had forgotten he was at camping trip, and was thinking if he was still dreaming, because waking up next to Goromi was so absurd (yet somehow pleasant) thought.

“I gotta pee”, she told, still nudging Kiryu, trying to zip open his sleeping bag.

“Then go outside and do your thing. Why are you telling me this?” Kiryu muttered, still laying down, hoping that turning to other side would allow him to go back to counting sheep.

“I... It’s dark in there”, she insisted. Kiryu had a funny feeling Goromi was still afraid after Akiyama’s story about the bloodthirsty ghosts.

“Fine...” Kiryu sighed, knowing he wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep anymore, not with Goromi bugging him like this.

They left the tent as quietly as they could. Kiryu grabbed the flashlight Saejima had left by the tent door for situations like this. The air outside was cold, a lot colder than when they had gone to sleep. They were both shivering already in their pajamas. Kiryu was wearing red flannel pants and black t-shirt, Goromi had a pastel pink silk dress and fuzzy, striped socks.

Goromi started walking deeper into the forest, following the zig-zaggy path towards the mountain. Kiryu followed right in her footsteps, showing her light so she wouldn’t stumble in roots or rocks.

“I guess this is far enough. Don’t follow me. And absolutely no peekin’!” she said after they had walked for a minute or so. Kiryu gave her the flashlight and stood by the path, waiting for her to be done.

Out of politeness, Kiryu gazed to the sky. He didn’t remember seeing stars ever blink so brightly as they did tonight. Maybe it was the lack of any other light that allowed them to shine in their full glory. Moon was feeling shy, hiding behind the mountains. Kiryu wanted to visit those mountains. Maybe he should suggest it for tomorrow’s activity, unless they had something else planned. As it come to food, they were doing pretty great, as long as they made sure not to allow Goromi anywhere near the supplies again.

Thinking about Goromi, she had been gone for quite a while now, Kiryu realized. Did girls usually take this long to empty their bladder, or had something happened to her?

"Goromi? Are you alright in there?" Kiryu yelled into the darkness. The light from the flashlight was nowhere to be seen all of the sudden.

Goromi heard mysterious rustling somewhere behind her, as well as Kiryu's shout. She was too afraid to make a sound, let alone yell back, as she knew it would reveal her location to those pesky ectoplasm eeries. Just to be safe, she even clicked the flashlight off. The stars in the sky would give her enough light to find back on the trail alone. As soon as she would meet with Kiryu again, she knew she'd be safe. He had already saved her once from those Dust Devils, who were definitely worse than a few ghosts. Just how much of a fight could non-physical, centuries old guys fight put up, anyway?

Goromi found herself back on the trail, but to her horror, Kiryu was nowhere to be seen. Had she already gotten lost? Had she turned to the wrong direction? She was panicking. She wanted to scream for help, but the words got stuck in her throat.

"Follow me", spoke a stranger's voice. Goromi didn't know why, but before she could think this through, she already realized she was walking towards the sound.

This mysterious person turned out to be a woman. Not just any woman, but really pretty one, with almond

eyes, charming, trust-worthy smile and the one detail that really caught Goromi's attention, huge breasts. There was no denying Goromi felt rather jealous of that.

"You can trust me", the woman spoke. Her voice was incredibly soothing, and Goromi didn't doubt for a second about trusting this person she had never met before. "There's no need to be afraid. I'll help you back to your camp. Walk ahead, I'll be right behind you."

If there would've been any doubt in Goromi, she would've realized that leaving her back vulnerable like this was a stupid thing to do. But for whatever the reason, Goromi trusted this woman, as if she had known her for years. A gentle push to the back, and Goromi found herself walking along the trail, the mysterious lady walking right behind her.

"Who are you?" Goromi asked. The woman didn't answer. In fact, she remained quiet for the rest of the journey back to the camp, which wasn't all that long. The campfire's embers were still red hot, and the stars were reflecting from the sea's mirror-calm surface.

"Thank you!" Goromi said to the woman upon reaching the camp. Not only this encounter had been miraculous in terms of good luck, Goromi couldn't help but to wonder how was this woman so wise to know exactly where Goromi was headed. "By the way, how did you know where I was supposed to be goin'?"

The woman had already turned her back. Goromi thought she must've been sleepy, because she was sure

she saw a fluffy tail peeking from under the silky smooth, flower-patterned kimono.

Barely few moments later, Goromi saw another person approaching the camp.

“Goromi! I was so worried! How did you find back?” Kiryu sighed, now running towards Goromi to check if she was okay.

“I...” Goromi started. She didn’t think Kiryu would believe her words about fox-tailed lady, so she didn’t even bother trying to tell about her. “Did you see anyone on your way back?”

“No. Why? There was a fox near the camp though”, Kiryu answered.

A fox, huh? Whether it was just a coincidence or something more, Goromi only hoped Saejima’s traps would remain fox-free for now.

The next night was a lot more successful than the last one. Saejima was by the sea, trying to hook some rarer fishes which only ate during the night, and Akiyama had already hit the tent, snuggled up in his sleeping bag, reaching levels of comfy never even thought possible. That left Kiryu and Goromi to be the only ones in the camp. They were both wide awake, even when the clock was already nearing midnight. Not that neither of them knew it, after all, neither of them had bought a clock with them. The exact time didn’t matter in here.

Saejima had mentioned something about a shower of shooting stars passing through the northern sky tonight.

Unsure of what else to kill the time on, Kiryu suggested Goromi would join him on a midnight hike up the mountain, as it was a fine night without a single cloud in the sky to block the view.

It wasn't too steep of a climb, there was a neat, well-kept trail with a sign making it impossible to get lost along the way.

"Go ahead. I don't want ya peekin' under my dress", Goromi joked as they reached a set of steps taking them up a rather rocky rise. The higher they climbed, the more impressive the view grew. Upon reaching the top of the mountain where there were no more trees to block the view, they were both left breathless and not only from the exhaustion from the climb.

"This place is beautiful", Kiryu said in awe. The only lights besides the stars were campfires down at the root of the mountain. They seemed all so tiny and distant, as if they belonged to a different world altogether.

"I guess I should go campin' with Saejima more often", Goromi said, standing just next to Kiryu. "Who knows how many places like this he has seen."

"He seems like he has done this for a long time. His survival skills are impressive", Kiryu agreed, laying down a piece of cloth to lie on.

"He got really into it durin' his first year in high school", Goromi revealed.

"I didn't know our school had a camping club", Kiryu answered. If only he would've known such a thing existed, he might've considered joining in. Then again,

then he wouldn't have met with Saejima, who had introduced this new hobby to him in the first place.

"It doesn't. He spent his first year in a boardin' school for some stupid prank we tried to pull off. It's not my business to talk about it though, ask it from himself if you're curious", Goromi explained, laying herself next to Kiryu.

"Really? I wouldn't have guessed, he seems so... Well, don't take this the wrong way, different from you", Kiryu confessed, regretting he didn't find a kinder way to phrase his words. Goromi didn't seem to mind it though, in fact, she laughed.

"Everyone says that. He grew a lot durin' his year away. So did I, but differently. We we're but innocent pranksters back then. While he learned to behave, I only learned to cope by causin' trouble wherever I went. He barely recognized be when he returned here", Goromi explained. There was no hint of bitterness in her voice, no remorse, only wistfulness.

"We all cope with losses differently", Kiryu tried to comfort her to his best ability. Goromi laughed again.

"I sabotaged the bikes of some Rockin' Cockatoos members for fuck's sake. I had no fuckin' idea who they were, only that they had a shiny new bikes and I was havin' particularly bad day", she revealed, sounding humored by this rather than regretful.

"And you still try to get in their ranks? I'm not sure if that's one bold move or just stupidity", Kiryu gasped,

remembering all too well about Goromi's plan to flirt to Ryuji to get an easier entrance to his gang.

"Oh, it'll only get better. I got caught by them not long after. They punished me, thought it'd be amusin' prank to pull off. Ryuji's idea, y'know. Hah. If only he knew he ended up helpin' me out. I mean, I look better than ever, don't I?" Goromi continued her story. Kiryu didn't know what he was supposed to answer to that. He couldn't deny he had been curious about the eyepatch, and had to admit Ryuji seemed like stupid enough to fall to that Clark Kent-like costume change identity swap.

One thing Kiryu knew, however, was that Goromi was misjudged character. Sure, she was difficult at times, but she was not a bad person. No, in fact, she was very kind and compassionate. It was only her looks and unpractical behavior that made everyone judge her before getting to know her properly.

As one particular shooting star passed by, Kiryu made a wish. Not that he necessarily believed in such things, but not like he would lose anything if he tried it. His modest wish was something like more times like this with his friends in the future. Goromi had likely done her share of wishes as well, after all, from what Kiryu had understood, girls were a lot more drawn to thoughts like destiny and such. What was it she could've wished for, Kiryu didn't know, because that night, her smile had been brighter than any of the stars. As if she already had everything she could have hoped for right here with her.



## EPISODE 7

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In the scariest dark hides a marvelous spark

“Do I look ridiculous in this shirt?” Nishiki asked from Kiryu, whose eyes were glued on TV on some re-run of sitcom from a decade ago.

“What is it with people always asking fashion advice from me?” Kiryu scoffed.

“I just want to impress Yumi, you know”, Nishiki defended, staring at his reflection from the mirror.

Tonight was the festival night. Nishiki had booked up a date with a classmate he had had a crush on for some time now, and as Kiryu had nothing else to do that day, had decided to drag along. Of course he would leave those lovebirds alone if the situation got too sweet for him to handle. Who knows, maybe he would end up

meeting a certain nice girl there as well... Then again, Goromi didn't seem like the kind of girl to enjoy silly activities like festival games. Fireworks, maybe, after all, they were loud, colorful and dangerous in wrong hands.

The journey to festival grounds had been mostly Nishiki babbling on nervously, asking for Kiryu for advice on charming Yumi. As if Kiryu would've known any better on how to impress girls. His words of advice were mostly something along the lines of being yourself and remembering to enjoy the moment and that everything would fall into place, eventually.

A girl in light blue yukata was waiting for Nishiki by the entry to the festival grounds.

"Hi Yumi-chan", Nishiki greeted her, smiling shyly. Kiryu wasn't sure whether it was the warm lights emitting from the paper lanterns, or was Nishiki's face ever so slightly redder than usually?

"Ah, I see you brought your brother along as well", Yumi said, eyeing between Nishiki and Kiryu. "The more the merrier, right?"

Together, all three of them entered the park. Rows of stands surrounded them, a bombardment of delicious scents, cheerful chatter and bright lights all around. This was the first time both for Kiryu and Nishiki to visit festival as big and fancy as this one, so needless to say they were at a loss of words in awe of it all.

"Why don't we buy some yakitori?" Yumi suggested, realizing both her date and Kiryu were too mesmerized

to make any decisions just yet. The boys agreed, stopping by a stand. An older man stood behind it, working with a smile on his wrinkled face. Nishiki was the nice guy and offered to pay for all three of them. Soon they walked away from the stand with tasty chicken skewers in their hands.

Nishiki let out a cry, as he had burned his tongue, digging in straight away without waiting the skewered goodness to cool down. This poor young man had been so nervous he hadn't swallowed down a single piece of food since yesterday evening, so it was of no surprise he was hungry.

"Water. Be right back", Nishiki grunted, as he handed the remainder of his skewer for Kiryu to hold.

"So, what have you been up to this summer?" Yumi asked after a while, realizing the silence between her and Kiryu felt rather awkward, as they had just stood there, both staring at the direction of where Nishiki had run off to.

"I was camping in Sameyama not too long ago", Kiryu answered.

"Really? That must've been nice", Yumi said back. "I didn't know you like that kinda stuff."

"Me neither, not until now. It was nice, yeah. We even hunted some rabbits with my friend Sa—" Kiryu started his story, but his words got all mangled up as he felt a hand over his shoulder. The grasp was a lot tougher than was called for. "Goromi? Good to see you here."

“Who’s this?” Goromi asked, not nearly as happy about this unexpected meeting as Kiryu had been.

“My name is Yumi. Kiryu is my classmate”, Yumi introduced herself. There was a look of fear in her eyes as she saw the fury burning in Goromi’s lone eye.

“I didn’t ask for your name. I meant what are ya doin’ here with Kiryu?” Goromi specified the reason behind her rather aggressive mood. Before Kiryu had the chance to count one plus one together, Nishiki had returned.

“Sorry about that. Oh, hi Goromi...”, he sighed, retrieving his yakitori from Kiryu’s hand. “I didn’t know we had a double date.”

“You see, Yumi is Nishiki’s friend, I was only-” Kiryu spoke, only to get interrupted again. At least this time Goromi didn’t seem that upset anymore.

“Are we on a date?” she repeated Nishiki’s word of choice, suddenly blushing and her anger fading away in a blink of an eye.

“No. I mean, maybe? I don’t know”, Kiryu got mangled up in his words yet again. What was it with girls that seemed to make boys too nervous to complete even the simplest of tasks, like eating or finishing sentences?

“Y’know, ya could’ve just asked me out. We both know I can’t say no, not to ya at least”, Goromi cooed, enjoying the shocked look on both Nishiki’s, and to some extent, Yumi’s faces. Kiryu was rubbing the back of his neck, hoping he’d be somewhere else than standing right there and then.

“I... We’ll leave you to it. I’ll meet you back at home, bro”, Kiryu said to Nishiki, who very much looked like he was feeling almost as uneasy as Kiryu had just moments ago. Kiryu grabbed Goromi by the arm and lead her somewhere where Nishiki couldn’t see nor them anymore. Whether it was his own hide Kiryu wanted to protect or Goromi’s, he couldn’t be entirely sure.

It was only now that the situation had calmed that Kiryu could lay his eyes on Goromi, who was unusually pretty as of tonight. Kiryu had already gotten used to not seeing her in the school uniform, but the pink yukata with cherry blossom pattern and black obi bow had been really unexpected sight to see. Her hair was tied in a high, somewhat messy bun with a beautifully detailed flower pin to keep it up. Once again she seemed so much taller than Kiryu, as those geta sandals gave her quite the boost in her already impressive height.

“Have ya been here for long?” Goromi asked, eyeing around her as if she was looking for someone. “Have ya seen Saejima or Akiyama? I lost them a while ago.”

“Sorry, no. Me and Nishiki just got here”, Kiryu told. Goromi didn’t seem too bothered by this. No, instead, she grabbed Kiryu’s arm and began dragging her along.

“There’s somethin’ I wanna show ya!” she told, sounding very excited. What was it that got her so happy, Kiryu hoped soon to find out.

It didn’t take them long to stop by a certain stand. It was none other than a ball toss game, where you could

win all kinds of prizes depending on how good was your aim. There was quite the line to play it, and as the queue progressed, Kiryu understood why. If you could hit all your five balls, you won the grand prize of giant bird plushie, pink with white tummy and wearing a ridiculous green hat. A row of those round creatures rested on a shelf just above the five towers made of tin cans.

“Please? I know ya can do it. I’d ask Saejima, but he’s nowhere to be seen”, Goromi begged. Kiryu couldn’t fight against that puppy eye of hers.

“Fine. I’ll try it, but no promises”, Kiryu sighed, digging for his wallet to pull some cash. He had saved up quite a bit, and even if he didn’t know exactly for what he had saved it up for, this wasn’t the first thing it would’ve been.

The vendor gave Kiryu five striped balls. The shape of them was uneven, and considering the feel and the weight of them, Kiryu thought them to be filled with rice. The goal was to knock down the towers on a shelf few steps away from Kiryu. This was not rocket science, just a matter of hand-eye coordination.

Kiryu gave one ball a quick few test throws in the air just to feel how it felt. Quite heavy, it would curve down pretty fast after being thrown. Better throw slightly higher than you wanted it to land then.

“Here we go”, he said, throwing the first one. It hit, although it was nearly a miss. The second one was another near miss. Third one was off by quite a lot.

Fourth one was a perfect aim. The fifth and the last one was another miss. Three out of five earned Kiryu a rubber key chain in a shape of a cat.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do better than that”, Kiryu said, handing Goromi the key chain. She smiled back. It was a polite, compassionate smile, and not a one of great joy.

“I... Uh. Fine. Let me see if I have more money”, Kiryu muttered, returning to dig through his wallet. He knew there was enough for at least few more tries. The vendor grinned when Kiryu handed her more of his hard-saved money. Kiryu ended up with another three out of five, this time getting a cheap plastic pearl bracelet. Goromi slipped it onto her wrist.

“Okay, I got the hang of this. One more try. I swear I can do it now”, Kiryu insisted. At this point, it was not only to make Goromi’s smile shine brighter than any of the paper lanterns, but to prove to himself he could do it. Two out of five. Kiryu was frustrated with himself, earning only a small strawberry lollipop this time. He didn’t want it. No, the only sweet he craved right now was the sweet taste of victory.

“Fourth time’s the charm”, Kiryu sighed, handing out the last bill from his wallet. This was it. All or nothing. One hit. Two hits. Three hits. Four hits. Miss. Kiryu was rewarded with a small shark plushie for that one.

“Heck”, he grunted. He felt a hand over his shoulder. A lot bigger hand with softer grasp than earlier tonight.

“Ya tried your best”, Saejima comforted Kiryu, handing a crumpled bill to the vendor himself. “I swore I

wouldn't do this, but we're too deep in this shit to be givin' up now."

Saejima seemed menacing as he prepared to make his throws. He aimed carefully before throwing the first ball. It right to the base of the tower, making it fall down neatly. Same with the second, third and fourth ones. Goromi, as well as Kiryu, were both cheering for Saejima. He seemed quite calm under a stress like this. He hit the base of the fifth tower, just as he had hit the four previous ones, but this one had refused to fall down.

"What the fuck?" he asked, leaning over the stand counter. He had gone from calm to furious in no time.

"Better luck next time", the vendor said, already preparing to cash out more money from unsuspecting clients.

Something snapped inside of Kiryu's head at that moment. He pulled out his walled and emptied the very few coins he had there on the counter. The vendor grinned smugly as she counted them. There was not nearly enough, but maybe she just enjoyed Kiryu's torment, as she agreed to let him give it a one last go, if only with two balls.

"Kiryu, y'know it's impossible, right?" Saejima tried to convince Kiryu, who had already made his decision.

Kiryu made his first throw, which very much missed all the towers. He had aimed way too high. That had been a throw of sheer anger, which certainly would've made the glued, screwed, however manipulated tower to

fall down, if only it would've hit its goal. But Kiryu had another plan. He threw another angry ball like that, and just so hit the supporting structure of the shelf that stored those bird plushies. The shelf came crashing down, which like a domino effect, knocked down all the can towers (and half of the stand's support structures, but the fishy vendor had had it coming). Both Goromi and Saejima cheered at Kiryu's heroic act of self-served justice. Even Akiyama, who had woken up from a nap from just behind the stand, joined to his friend's celebrations.

"Nothing is impossible. Although seeing a frown on her face became quite close on that", Kiryu said to Saejima when Goromi was busy picking out the fluffiest of those hefty chonk birds. Saejima was close on being moved to tears from Kiryu's chivalry.

"Kiryu, I'm so glad to have met ya", Saejima said, giving Kiryu a very big brother-like hug. If Kiryu had ever been afraid of Saejima, he had realized by now that there was nothing of him to fear. If something, he was a very caring young man, who only wanted the very best for those he held the dearest to him.

"Get a room you two", Akiyama laughed. Whether he was speaking for Kiryu and Saejima, or to Goromi and her pet plushie who she had now named as Bun-chan remained as a mystery.

The more the merrier, as Yumi had said earlier tonight. The whole gang was here, and the atmosphere was just

magical. Together they adventured around the festival's various festivities, although avoiding any more suspicious money scams marketed as games. Kiryu was still in shock at just how he had acted. The rage he had gone through back there was something he had last experienced when saving Goromi months ago. What was it about that girl that made Kiryu so willing to break rules he had always been so willing to follow?

Saejima was feeling generous, as well as sorry for Kiryu's spent money, so he offered everyone rounds of okonomiyaki from a stand one if his classmate was running with their father.

"Mr. Bun-chan, would ya like to try some of this too?" Goromi spoke to her plushie she had laid on an empty seat around the picnic table they were seated. "This ain't bird food, ya silly."

"Goromi, do ya even know what birds eats?" Saejima laughed, eyeing at Goromi goofing around.

"Birds eat bird food, duh", she shrugged, stuffing the piece of okonomiyaki between the chopsticks into her mouth.

"You really like that bird", Kiryu said smiling. "You know, if Saejima hadn't called out the bluff, I don't know if I could've done that. I don't understand, I was just so furious with that scammer."

"I was kinda wondering what the vendor was up to with that nail gun", Akiyama told, revealing he had very much known this tidbit everyone only wished they had known an hour ago.

“You knew and didn’t tell us?” Goromi asked. “Kiryu-chan wasted all that money for nothin’!”

“I didn’t know you’d be giving it a go. And I was too tired to bother warning others. Someone’s failure is still someone else’s profit, in the end”, Akiyama tried to defend both himself and the vendor.

“What were you doing there, anyway? It’s a bit of an odd place to nap, isn’t it?” Kiryu asked. He had already caught Akiyama sleeping in so many unexpected places it was more of an exception than an oddity at this point.

“That stand was a brilliant cover from wind” Akiyama answered. Kiryu wasn’t entirely convinced just yet.

“Why don’t you sleep home?” Kiryu continued with the questions.

“I don’t have one”, Akiyama admitted with a straight face.

“What, really?” Kiryu didn’t know if he believed it or not. It seemed likely, considering the unconventional places to nap, but Akiyama was still young, and seemed to be doing so well. Or maybe it was just the side of his character he wanted everyone to see? Akiyama nodded to Kiryu’s question, not bothering to explain it further, as he was busy eating his okonomiyaki before it would get cold. “Fine. Does anyone else have something to confess while we’re at it? So far you guys have been just full of surprises.”

What Kiryu had meant as a joke got both Saejima and Goromi looking at each other. Saejima was the first one to speak up.

"There's plenty of rumors circulatin' about me. Or, not really all that many, but you've probably heard them callin' me Taiga 'i8-shot' Saejima at one point or another", he spoke.

"No, doesn't ring any bells actually", Kiryu admitted. It was a peculiar nickname to have, Kiryu would've sure remembered if he had heard something like that.

"Really? Well, I might as well explain it before ya hear 'bout it from someone else", Saejima scoffed. "I spent a year in boardin' school a while back. I got sent there for eggin' one idiot's house 'cause he kept bullyin' my friends."

"What, you got sent away for an entire year for a prank like that? And how it's any way related to that name?" Kiryu asked. He remembered what Goromi had told him while they had been stargazing, so it was good to get more insight on that subject.

"This boy had a rich and influential family, y'see. Lived in a big mansion. Hit all the eighteen windows without a single miss", Saejima explained. Considering the absurdity, the sheer hilarity of this, he seemed awfully serious, almost regretting about it. Saejima wasn't sure how to word it, but it wasn't the act itself he was bitter about, not even the punishment itself, but the fact he got caught and was sent away. It was during his year of absence that Goromi had grown so troubled, as she had back then lost the one genuine friend she had.

"Oh... Wow. I'm sorry", Kiryu said, finding it hard to know what to say after a story like that. "World is so

unfair sometimes, isn't it? And I really didn't mean to pry, it was just a joke, really..."

"Nah, ya deserve the truth. You've proven time and time again that you're a guy worth trustin'", Saejima admitted. He kept eyeing Goromi, as if he was expecting for her to stay something. She didn't. Not until they had eaten their okonomiyakis and were thinking about what they'd want to do next.

There was still about an hour of time to kill before the main event of tonight, the grand fireworks show. Goromi insisted they'd go near the shooting location already to get good places to watch the bombardment of colors filling the night sky. Akiyama, who knew this very park better than his own pockets, revealed there was a bridge with a fantastic view not too far from here from where you would get a perfect view. Everyone agreed it sounded like a good idea to pursue, so with Akiyama in the lead, they left the immediate area of festivities. Only later Kiryu realized he hadn't said his farewells to Nishiki, but assumed him to be busy with Yumi, anyway.

The rest of the city was a lot more quiet than usual, as most of the citizens and tourists alike had gathered in the festival grounds. Somehow it was very eery, walking in those streets of Tokyo and to hear your own thoughts for once. At least to hear them in those few moments when Goromi wasn't babbling on about something.

“Did I ever tell ya about the time I accidentally blew up a fuckin’ oil fryer?” she boasted, her laughter echoing in the air.

“Yeah, few times actually”, Akiyama pointed out. It was surprising he remembered this, after all, what no one else knew was that half of the discussions he had with Goromi, he was half-asleep and just muttered words of agreement every now and then.

“The smuggets were delicious though”, Kiryu commented, still having nightmares about that excuse of a cheeseburger.

“What the fuck is a smugget?” Saejima and Akiyama asked at the same time, exchanging some curious looks.

“Ouch!” Yelled Goromi half-way through their journey to the bridge.

“Are you okay?” Kiryu, who had been the nearest to her, asked.

“My stupid fuckin’ sandal broke apart” she whined, sitting in the ground and holding her ankle. The hem of her kimono had raised up enough to show most of her thigh, which made Kiryu suddenly very interested in looking in every possible direction expect Goromi’s bare skin.

Upon closer inspection, performed by both Akiyama and Saejima, it seemed the strand of her wooden sandal had snapped right off. Missed step following this had made Goromi to sprain her ankle.

“The bridge isn’t that much further”, Akiyama told, pointing towards the bridge, which was just a few blocks away by now. “Can you make it there?”

“Fuck no. Hurts like hell”, Goromi answered, sounding pissed.

“Hey, watch your mouth, we’re in public y’know”, Saejima called her out, only to get his words ignored by a very rude hand gesture by Goromi herself.

Kiryu, who had been awfully silent for the last few unspecified amounts of time, finally gathered the courage to look in direction of this damsel in distress. Her ankle was still intact, but it did seem redder than was normal, and in Goromi’s eye you could see the pain she was in. If only there was a way to help him, preferably in a way she wouldn’t have to lay any weight on that sore leg...

“I suppose I gotta carry ya then. Alright, let’s go”, Saejima sighed, already crouching down to pick Goromi up. Kiryu was sure he was just imagining it all, but for a brief moment there was not only pain but tread in Goromi’s eye.

“Bro, wait! I’ll leave Mr. Bun-chan in your care, you’ve always been so good with animals”, Goromi insisted, pointing at the majestically round bird plushie laying in the ground. “Pick that up before all the dirt from ground sinks in his fine fur or whatever their skin is called.”

Saejima rolled his eyes, but picked the bird up nonetheless.

"Decided ya can walk on your own after all?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I got this... Someone just help me up", she mumbled, now looking at Kiryu's direction. Kiryu, who was already a fine gentleman within this group's sphere of reputation at least, offered his hand to Goromi, who without a hesitation grasped it. "Thanks."

"Are you sure you're fine?" Kiryu, who was still holding her arm, asked. He felt suspicious after seeing Goromi's first few steps being very slow and filled with suffering.

"Yeah. This is fi—" she started, but ended up falling again. Kiryu's reflexes surprised all of them, most of all himself. Goromi laid in his arms. "Okay, maybe this isn't fine. Any chance you'd be willin' to carry me?"

"I guess I have no choice on that, even if I'd say no. Not that I would say that. Hop on", Kiryu replied, crouching down so Goromi could hop on his back.

What Kiryu didn't know, was that this was not what Goromi had expected, not at all. No, she had expected something more romantic. Akiyama knew of Goromi's plan to the tiniest of detail and couldn't fight against a cheeky smile when he saw Goromi climbing on Kiryu's back for not-so-romantic piggyback ride.

Goromi's warm breathing tickled on Kiryu's neck as they began moving forward. She wasn't that heavy to carry, not at all. It was her constant swaying and tight hold of Kiryu's upper body that made her hard to carry. But even so, Kiryu wouldn't have swapped places with

anyone right now. He didn't know that Goromi felt exactly the same. What Kiryu also didn't notice was Goromi's face. Her smile was affectionate and genuine, from which both Akiyama and Saejima were happy for her behalf.

Eventually they had arrived at the bridge. Akiyama had been right, the view was fantastic to the direction where the rockets would shoot from in about fifteen minutes later.

"Can you stand on your own?" Kiryu asked from Goromi, still hanging on his back. His back was aching a little by now.

"I think so. Thanks, you're really strong", she replied, letting go of Kiryu and sliding down from his back.

"I hope you didn't hurt your ankle too bad", Kiryu said back at her, leaning against the bridge's railing and admiring the city lights reflecting from the river flowing underneath, just like time was flowing by. Summer had passed in a flash. School would start soon, and then everyone would have to wait all the time until Christmas to get a next breather moment. It was sad, in a way, that these good times always came to an end. This would be the summer to remember, of that Kiryu was sure. The next summer, both Goromi and Saejima would have already graduated, maybe moved away. The thought pained Kiryu, it really did. Instead of wallowing in the misery of the inevitable, he knew he should just grasp

the moment, hold it till his knuckles were white and numb.

“Guys, thanks for the best summer of my life”, he spoke out, looking through each of his three friends.

“Hey, it’s not over yet. The evening’s still young”, Akiyama replied, for some reason nudging Goromi’s side. “And besides, we still have few more weeks of vacation left, don’t we?”

“Let me guess, ya haven’t even started with your homework yet?” Saejima asked, furrowing his brows on Akiyama.

“I’ve thought about starting. That’s like, halfway there already, right?” Akiyama laughed, rubbing the back of his neck, whistling away a catchy melody.

“Exactly!” Goromi agreed with her friend, leaning over the railing. If she wasn’t careful, she might fall. Kiryu had carried her, but jumping to river who knows how deep and full of toxins, that was something he wasn’t willing to do. Or at least willing to admit he would.

“Ya haven’t started them either? Teacher’s gonna fail ya, y’know?” Saejima called Goromi out, wiping off the relaxed smile on her face.

“At least I’d get one more year to hang around with my guys Akiyama and Kiryu-chan! That might not be so bad after all”, she finally said, forcing a smile back on her face. Saejima shook his head, refusing to listen for excuses like this.

As nice as another year with Goromi did sound, Kiryu knew he should be there to help her. He owed that much to Saejima.

“Please, focus on your studies. Not like graduating would mean we can’t be friends anymore”, Kiryu tried to convince both himself and Goromi alike with those words.

“After all this time, ya consider us nothin’ more but friends?” Goromi gasped, looking at Kiryu, who was so caught up on this question he totally missed both Akiyama and Saejima holding their breaths in excitement on Kiryu’s answer.

“I’m not good at this, alright. You mean a lot to me and have been a great friend...” Kiryu muttered, finding it suddenly very hard to come up the right words to convey his feelings. Why was it always Goromi asking these stupid feeling-related questions, anyway? Saejima and Akiyama just accepted it as-is when Kiryu had called them as friends.

“Kiryu-chan, ya big dummy, can’t ya see I like ya?!” Goromi continued, eyeing the expression on Kiryu’s face, which was rather expression-free to her disappointment.

“I know, and I’ve enjoyed the times we’ve spent together too!” Kiryu said back, wondering why Goromi seemed so upset. What had he done wrong this time? Surely he had said nothing wrong? He was still too busy analyzing their discussion that he didn’t realize Akiyama and Saejima soon passing out from the lack of oxygen if

this nerve-wrecking moment wouldn't come to some sort of conclusion soon.

"No! I mean I *like* like ya! I wish we—" Goromi started her sentence. How she continued from there, no one but she knew, as the first of the fireworks had just gone off.

The sky was filled with green and yellow showers, accompanied by loud sounds of explosions. It was a magical sight to lay your eyes on, each rocket being more massive, brighter and more colorful and beautiful than the last one. Everyone seemed joyed, cheering and clapping, pointing at the sky. Even Goromi's frown turned up, eventually.

After one particularly pink and heart-shaped firework, Kiryu felt Goromi bumping into his direction.

"Is your ankle hurting again?" Kiryu asked, trying not to sound too worried.

"It's fine. Really", she answered. Kiryu didn't notice her kicking Akiyama in the shin after the bump he had caused.

"Good", Kiryu said, turning his gaze back to the sky. Goromi pulled his sleeve.

"Good... Good luck..." Goromi repeated Kiryu's words. "Did ya know it brings good luck if ya kiss under the fireworks?"

She had whispered the latter part. Her face was just next to Kiryu's ear. Those quiet words had made Kiryu shiver, even when it had been extraordinarily hot and humid evening.

“I thought it was only during New Year”, Kiryu corrected Goromi’s false information. Seemed she didn’t much care for this, but giggled instead.

“We’ll never know unless we try”, Goromi whispered. Before Kiryu had time to process what this could mean, he felt Goromi’s lips pressing against his cheek.

Under the exploding sky, loud booms and flashing lights, Kiryu couldn’t deny feeling like the luckiest guy alive right then.

About an hour later, Kiryu came back at home. As soon as he had gotten his shoes off, the door opened again. Nishiki had followed right in Kiryu’s footsteps.

“How did it go with Yumi?” Kiryu asked, walking to the kitchen to mix himself a cup of iced tea. He needed something to calm him down after the hot day and exciting evening.

“Good, I guess. I even got her home number so I can invite her out again sometime”, Nishiki answered, sounding quite happy with himself. “How did it go for you?”

“I had lots of fun, although I have to admit, Goromi is really hard to figure out sometimes”, Kiryu spoke while making the tea. He turned toward Nishiki. “Would you like some iced tea?”

Nishiki, who was just about to agree on Kiryu’s suggestion, forgot entirely what he was about to say as he saw his brother’s face. There was a red mark on his

cheek, funnily enough, in the exact same shade as the lipstick Goromi had worn this evening.

“Poor Goromi...” Nishiki sighed, knowing just how clueless Kiryu was when it came to romance. She’d really have to spell it out if she wanted Kiryu to realize there was more to life than friendship and hugs. Nishiki couldn’t bring himself to explain it to Kiryu.

“What did you say?” Kiryu asked.

“I’d like some iced tea, thanks”, Nishiki quickly lied. Maybe if Goromi only would’ve been a nice and proper girl, like Yumi, he might’ve been willing to help out more. Oh well, at least this would be one heck of a comedy show to witness.



Meemimajima  
2021

## EPISODE 8

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All the things she said

Another term was about to begin on this misty Monday morning. Goromi had snoozed the alarm clock for the last thirty minutes. It was only last night that she swore to herself she could do this, get up early and make herself all pretty, prettier than usual just to surprise Kiryu. However, right now it very much seemed she wouldn't have time for anything but to apply lipstick and run to school with a piece of bread hanging from the corner of her mouth so she wouldn't run late yet again.

Goromi threw aside the blanket and got up, disappointed in herself for going to sleep so late. The eye bags under her eyes were dark, there was no concealer

strong enough to hide the fact she had barely slept last night. She changed her pajamas to a red matching set of underwear. As pointless as it was (not like anyone would see them), it made her feel cute and most importantly, girly. While everyone else wore bra to support their breasts, Goromi, who was flat as a plank, only did it because it felt like the right thing to do. What most didn't know, was that Goromi was a trans girl. Not even Kiryu knew, probably, and it pained Goromi. She knew she should tell him, before they'd get more serious. Goromi was afraid of rejection, even when she knew Kiryu was a good guy with a heart of gold.

Saejima was knocking on the door, as Goromi was getting on her black seifuku with white, loose socks, and didn't bother to tie the red scarf. Why should she, it was but a waste of time, especially now when Saejima was already waiting for her. They had been neighbors ever since they were kids, so it was lucky for them to stay that way after moving in to new city and new school.

"I'm comin', calm the fuck down! I've lost my umbrella", she yelled to Saejima, who was few knocks from shattering the whole door down.

"Can't ya leave without it? We're really gonna run late unless we leave now", he shouted back. Goromi gave up with the search for now after seeing it wasn't raining right now. According to forecast it would do so later that day, but maybe Goromi would find an umbrella 'to borrow' before that. And of course, there was always a

change Kiryu-chan was prepared, nothing quite like sharing an umbrella with your crush.

Goromi and Saejima arrived at the school grounds. Saejima, who was a diligent student, or at least more so than Goromi, headed to class. Goromi thought about skipping the biology, it was boring. She had more important matters to attend to. Anything would be higher on the priority list than dissecting frogs. To Goromi's surprise, the gardening shack was still up. Inside she heard a faint snoring, just the sound she had hoped for.

"Akiyama, your best friend is here!" Goromi announced as she pulled the door open and sat on the coffee table, as Akiyama had conquered the sofa, as usual. "Did ya miss me?"

"Goromi, please, I'm sleepy as fuck", Akiyama sighed, knowing there was no way he could nap with Goromi babbling on about her crush on Kiryu.

"Well, that makes two of us then", Goromi responded. "I've been too busy analyzin' everythin' going on between me and Kiryu, so I think I'm gonna go through it all with ya to refresh my memory."

"Fine, bring it on. But keep it short, or I'm gonna doze off", Akiyama agreed, getting into his comfortable listening and/or sleeping position.

“So, the start of it all, that time when he saved me from those Dust Devils, where he-” Goromi started right from the start.

“No need to rewind that one, I was literally there when it happened, dozing off in a nearby bush”, Akiyama interrupted Goromi to save at least a bit of the limited time we have for this chapter. “I mean, everyone seems to have witnessed that one.”

“Ya were there and never came to save me?!” Goromi roared.

“By the time I woke up to it, Kiryu was already there to save you, and to me the two of you seemed more than capable to deal with those pesky bastards”, Akiyama scoffed. Just thinking of that berry bush he had slept back then made him feel uncomfortable, pretty sure there was still a thorn or two remaining in his jacket to poke him every now and then.

“Well, ya could’ve told me that one sooner”, Goromi said, rolling her eye. “Anyway, I think the next big thing to happen between me and Kiryu was the sports day. Oh yeah, right, I’ve been meanin’ to ask since ya never bring it up yourself. How’s it goin’ with Hana? She put up quite a show for ya. Didn’t know she had that in her.”

“Ah, do we have to talk about this now? You know I don’t have any idea on how to do this. I mean she’s nice and kinda cute, but...” Akiyama spoke, fidgeting uncomfortably the hem of his blanket. He knew being homeless was not really a hit with ladies. If only he was doing better for himself, he might’ve pursued something

with Hana. Maybe. As good as he was with speaking and coming along with people, he was almost as clueless with girls as Kiryu. "Please, just remind me what happened during the sports day with Kiryu.

"Fine, I'll let you off the hook just this once. But ya gotta make a move on her, what you're doing' to her now is basically bullyin'. Anyway. I asked Kiryu to go for some karaoke with me. I half expected him to turn me down, but he was more than happy to join me. Can ya imagine? Too bad we never got around it eventually, I really would've loved to hear him sing. I'm sure he'd have a great voice."

"Then at least one of you could sing", Akiyama laughed. He had meant it as a joke, not that Goromi's singing was that bad, she just sometimes got just a bit too emotional in the middle of the song to forget there were other people to hear her too.

"You meanie! I mean, we tried to plan out the karaoke date, but then he caught me off the guard at the Smile Burger. Had to improvise quite a lot to make a good impression on him. The fastest way to a man's heart is through his stomach, don't they still say that? Remember, that day when I resigned?" Goromi reminisced, just the thought of that big, juicy hamburger got her mouth watering.

"Good thing you didn't become a surgeon then", Akiyama laughed yet again. Goromi was already kind of pissed off with his just a bit too laid-back attitude and

lack of meaningful feedback. “And besides, didn’t you get fired?”

“Dude, please, I need your help, not snarky comebacks”, Goromi sighed in irritation.

“Sorry, sorry”, Akiyama said. “Did he like the hamburger?”

“I think so. Too bad he ate up most of the smuggets first so after taking just a few bites of the hamburger he said it was too big for him to finish up”, Goromi told.

“Figures... Didn’t you go shopping after that, if I remember right?” Akiyama continued, hoping that Kiryu’s appetite wasn’t lost forever after having to witness just what Goromi considered being edible food.

“Yeah, I kinda forgot my clothes at the Smile or Die Burger and I needed the bikini to charm Ryuji, anyway. Thinkin’ back to it, I was an idiot tryin’ to woo him. I mean, I can’t stand that fucker, as I found out not long after”, Goromi kept going with her story.

“You mean the frilly bikini you had at the beach? Kiryu helped you to pick that out? Wow, he has an excellent taste”, Akiyama agreed.

“Nah, I was the one who picked it, but he said it looked good on me. I really had to pressure him to come to the dressin’ booth with me, and when he saw me, pretty soon he ran away. I think... I think he popped a boner for me, Akiyama, what would ya make of that?” Goromi clarified. She couldn’t remember just what she had told to Akiyama about the whole dressing booth

situation, but considering the surprised, if a bit joyful expression on his face, not all that much.

“Really? Are you sure?” Akiyama couldn’t help himself from asking. Not that it sounded all that suspicious. He was a teenage boy himself and knew just how easily you’d pitch a tent in the most unwanted situations.

“His nose was bleedin’, and he had his schoolbag on his lap”, Goromi detailed. She still felt warm in her heart, thinking about that fact that Kiryu had found her attractive despite her flaws. No. Not flaws. No. That was not a good way to think. Her unique characteristics that made her into the very Goromi everyone knew and loved.

“Okay, that’s a boner, alright. Was there anything else before the meetup at the beach?” Akiyama confirmed Goromi’s suspicions.

“The beach. Shit, I still feel like an idiot over that. He I thought Kiryu knew he was gettin’ into, but that was the first time I realized the two of us are from different worlds entirely”, Goromi sighed, her head hanging down.

“Nah, Kiryu’s the idiot on that one. Even I would’ve known what drinking at the beach means, or however you worded it back then. It’s not your fault. And he forgave you, didn’t he?”, Akiyama tried to cheer Goromi up. “And we had lots of fun at the beach in the end. Really nice co-incidence for all of us to be there at the same time.”

"I appreciate ya tryin' to help me out. Thanks", Goromi said, smiling towards Akiyama's direction.

"Next was the camping trip, right? It was a blast. Can't remember the last time I slept so well", Akiyama thought back, still remembering just how comfortable he had been there in the middle of the forest, wrapped up in his sleeping bag like a burrito.

"I gotta admit I was gettin' a bit jealous of Kiryu spendin' all that time with Saejima rather than me. What if he'd realize my bro's a lot cooler than me, which he totally isn't as we both know?" Goromi confessed. Akiyama had noticed Goromi seeming kind of down during that trip to the woods, but her mood had drastically improved during their last morning.

"It wasn't that bad, was it though?" he tried to squeeze out the next big revelation, which Goromi was thrilled to talk about.

"During the last night, we climbed one of the peaks. It was pretty", Goromi admitted.

"And...?" Akiyama hinted he was waiting for something more than just a hike. Goromi's wide smile told there was gonna be some good news coming up. Akiyama was half expecting Goromi to tell how they had kissed underneath the shooting stars.

"I told him about the prank Ryuji pulled on me!" Goromi revealed.

PAUSE. Why Goromi seemed all that happy to have confessed about a prank being pulled on her? The prank in question was something along the lines of Ryuji stealing Goromi's (who was going by the name Goro back then) school uniform bottom, which at the time was black, straight pants. The only thing to wear Goromi came across was a school uniform skirt, and after swallowing the pride, she put it on, and felt something strange, something unexpected: an euphoria. By accident, she had just found out why she had never felt truly comfortable in her skin but until that very moment. In the brief time of the next following weeks she bleached her hair, renewed her entire wardrobe and changed her name. And Ryuji could never tell that Goromi had been the one who had ruined his brand new bike. CONTINUE

“What did Kiryu say about it? He didn’t mind it, did he?” Akiyama checked, even though he already knew the answer. If it would’ve bothered Kiryu, he would’ve stopped hanging out with Goromi by now. And it was as Goromi had said, Kiryu was a young man with a golden heart.

“Nah, he took it well”, Goromi told. She had already forgotten by now that she hadn’t told Kiryu the full version, not even a hint of her true self. She really believed she had told him everything.

"I have to admit, I was expecting you to tell me you two kissed", Akiyama confessed. Goromi laughed.

"We have! Remember, at the festival, during the fireworks? Thanks for the push by the way", Goromi reminded Akiyama. Sure, it hadn't been a proper kiss on the lips, but it was a decent start to, say the least. By now, Kiryu should know just how Goromi felt about him. Then again, Kiryu was an idiot who might need a reminder or two more, but Goromi was more than fine with that...

And now, back to Kiryu and the current day.

Kiryu's first day of the autumn term had ended. It had been fun, seeing all of his classmates again. There had already been talks of the school festival day, which would only be in about two months. There were rumors some classes had already decided what they would do, but so far Kiryu's class had made no decisions on that.

"I'll meet you back at home later, gotta meet up with the band", Nishiki said to Kiryu, already rushing to another side of the school building. Kiryu had nothing more to do for today expect some homework, so he might as well head home for now. The heavy rain outside made gardening today pointless, soil was all muddy and not like the plants would need watering.

Kiryu barely had walked through the school's outer doors, when Goromi appeared in front of him. She was drenched and looked utterly miserable.

“Good to see ya, Kiryu-chan! I’ve been here waitin’ for who knows how long for a handsome young man with an umbrella to share”, she cooed, hanging to Kiryu’s arm, which made the act of umbrella opening surprisingly difficult task.

“Handsome young man, you say? I don’t know how high your standards are, but looks like you’ve had to wait for quite a long time by now”, Kiryu replied, popping open his umbrella.

“Catch the hint ya dumb ass, I meant *you!*” she sighed, refusing to leave from Kiryu’s side.

“Oh...” Kiryu said back, tilting the umbrella enough to cover Goromi as well as they left the school area. Many pairs of curious eyes were glued on them, and Kiryu didn’t know how he should feel about that. “So, where are we headed?”

“My house isn’t that far, it’s just next to the mall”, Goromi told, pointing to the left from the crossroad they had just arrived on.

“Don’t tell me you need my help with shopping again?” Kiryu tried to crack a joke.

“I could use a new jacket, I’m fuckin’ freezing”, Goromi confessed. Whether she was for real or just kidding, Kiryu hoped for the latter to be true.

“You can borrow mine”, Kiryu offered, handing the umbrella for Goromi to hold for the moment he stripped his jacket. He even helped it on Goromi, who was shivering. It was no wonder. Her clothes were soaked and the warm summer had turned into a not-so-warm

fall, with wind blowing around the leaves in various hues from red to yellow and everything in between.

Goromi hadn't lied. Her house wasn't all that far from the school, which was a relief. Sharing an umbrella had certain connotations not even Kiryu, the clueless protagonist, was unaware of. Goromi pulled the keys from her bag. Kiryu was happy to see the rubber cat key chain being attached to Goromi's bunch of keys.

"Sorry, it's bit of a mess, I left in a hurry", she warned, pulling the door open and stepping inside.

Bit of a mess was a modest way of saying a total heap of trash. There were clothes lying all around, posters of rock bands Kiryu had never heard of were barely hanging on, and towers of cans on her desk, few of them acting as ashtrays.

"It's... homey. Very colorful", Kiryu said, looking around.

"Damn bitch, I really live like this?" Goromi laughed, kicking off some trash bags to make room to reach the kitchen. "I swear it's not normally this messy. Oh well. Care to join for tea? I won't take no for an answer."

Kiryu, who hadn't had a say in this unexpected tea time, walked in Goromi's apartment, sitting on her unmade futon as the few chairs were all filled with piles of clothes. Why on earth would she even need all of those? On one particularly stacked chair there were more clothes than what Kiryu had owned through his entire life, probably.

“Black or green tea?” Goromi yelled from the kitchen, her words barely audible over the kettle whistling.

“Uh, green”, Kiryu answered. He really had no strong preference one way or another on that matter.

“Wrong, it’s black”, Goromi shouted back. “Or I think it’s black? Tell me, Kiryu-chan, is black tea supposed to glow purple?”

“Definitely not”, Kiryu thought, once again fearing for his life. He had been a fool to trust Goromi could boil even a cup of tea without making it incredibly cursed somehow.

Few moments, swear words and happy hums later Goromi returned to the living quarters with beaten-down school book as a tray and two cups of something that was supposed to be tea on top of it. The purple glow hadn’t been an exaggeration. No, those drinks definitely looked like nuclear waste in cute pink cups. The smell wasn’t much better, something like a moldy roadkill with hints of strawberry and bacon.

“I have some cookies as well if you’d like some”, she spoke, returning to the kitchen before Kiryu could have the chance to deny this generous yet lethal offer. Expect it wasn’t likely lethal, as Kiryu saw Goromi soon coming back with store bought, unopened pack of chocolate chip cookies.

“Thanks”, Kiryu said, picking the cup in his hands. Was this normal, or did the liquid sort of... hiss at Kiryu?

“No, I should be the one thankin’ ya for savin’ me from all the rain and cold”, Goromi insisted, taking a sip

from her tea. Her facial expression didn't change one bit, which Kiryu wasn't sure should he be worried or really worried about.

"I don't want you to get fever, that's all. You'll end up all bed-ridden and you'd end up even more behind with your studies", Kiryu replied, suspiciously eyeing the tea. Which was the deeper price to pay, painful, agonizing death, or possibly upsetting Goromi?

Kiryu took a sip. The texture was gooey, and the taste was so intense with, well, everything, that Kiryu worried for a second he'd never taste anything ever again. Well, at least there was no worry about the aftertaste if that would be the case.

"You've been spendin' too much time with Saejima. Ya sound just like him", Goromi laughed.

"What can I do, we're in the same club and we both care about you", Kiryu defended both himself and Saejima. Hearing those words being spoken, Goromi choked on her tea. Or maybe it was her taste buds finally waking up, trying to warn her.

"Don't say shit like that when I'm drinkin'. I could've choked!" she screeched, holding her hands over her chest as she coughed up the tea in her windpipe. Only now Kiryu realized she was still wearing those wet clothes, even his jacket.

"What, that we care about you? Why? Also, you should probably change your clothes before you get sick", Kiryu said caringly, flashing a caring smile to the person he very much cared about.

Goromi had the look on her face as she was about to protest Kiryu's words of wisdom, but the feeling of wet cloth sticking to her skin made her realize he had been right all along. Once again, Goromi insisted Kiryu to turn his back while she was changing, and Kiryu was too much of a good boy to disobey that order.

The question was, what should she wear to impress Kiryu? The tea hadn't done the trick like she had hoped to, so she really had to try even harder than she already had. Why oh why couldn't she have fallen for someone with more than two brain cells?

Kiryu looked around Goromi's room, the three corners he could look in, definitely not towards the one Goromi was changing in right now. Looking beneath all the mess, there was something that caught his attention. Black and white were not that unusual colors in her wardrobe, but all that lace... Was that a maid uniform? Had Goromi begun working in a different kind of restaurant to make money? Kiryu had a hard time imagining her in an outfit like that, being obedient and most of all, proper and modest.

"You got a new job already?" Kiryu found the courage to ask. Goromi turned around and now wore a crop top hoodie and short shorts, barely covering her buttocks.

"Ya mean the maid outfit? Hell no, I'd rather eat hatful of shit than do that. Nah, we're doing a fuckin' maid cafe for the school festival", she answered, throwing a disgusted look in the general direction of the uniform. Kiryu didn't think it would be that bad for him

personally, but could totally see why Goromi absolutely detested the idea.

“I’ll try to find the time to come see you then”, Kiryu promised.

“No way! I’m gonna be absent that day, catch a cold or somethin” she said immediately. In a sense, Kiryu was relieved for that decision. At least then she couldn’t poison anyone with her treats. But who knows how cute Goromi would have looked with the maid uniform on...

Kiryu didn’t have too much time to ponder upon that thought, as Goromi spoke again.

“Once you’ve downed that tea, I’m gonna need your help with one lil’ thing”, she requested. Kiryu was sure his tea was cold by now, but he waited until Goromi looked another way for a moment, so he could gulp it down in one go and not offend her with a disgusted expression.

“Thanks for the tea. So what was it you needed my help with?” Kiryu asked once he had recovered from that excuse of a tea.

“See that mirror? I wanna move it to another wall. I could probably do by it myself, but considerin’ the state my room is in, I’d probably stumble and seven years of bad luck would fall upon me”, she answered. “I’ve been plannin’ to ask Saejima, but if I’d let him here, he’d spend the first half an hour just lecturin’ some shit ‘bout clean room guaranteeein’ clean mind.”

Kiryu took the empty teacups to the kitchen as Goromi tossed most of the clothes to the other side of

the room to make some space to operate the mirror. It was quite tall mirror, decorated with stickers and rounded by thick wooden frames.

“On count of three, alright? One... Two... Three...” Kiryu initiated the lift. The mirror wasn’t as heavy as Kiryu had expected, or maybe Goromi was stronger than Kiryu had assumed. Moving it to the opposite side of the room would have been a straightforward task, if only there wouldn’t have been so much clutter all around, just as Goromi had said herself.

She instructed to lay the mirror next to a bookshelf (which, considering the name, didn’t contain that many books to begin with).

“Great job. I knew I could count on ya, you’re so strong and handsome!” Goromi cooed, admiring the fresh look of her room.

“You too”, Kiryu sighed with little thinking, as he was so relieved everything had gone smoothly without accidents in that safety hazard of a room. There was a flash of rage in Goromi’s eye suddenly, as she jumped on Kiryu and slammed him against the wall.

“Never ever call me that”, she grunted, her anger-filled words spitting on Kiryu’s face. This was the first time Kiryu truly feared Goromi.

“I... Uh... I didn’t mean... I didn’t mean it like that...” Kiryu muttered, swallowing heavily. “I didn’t choose my words wisely. I meant you look good. Sorry... Sorry if I upset you. Really.”

Goromi saw the dread in Kiryu's eyes. Her clenched fist was laying against the wall and it was aching. Oh fuck. She had gone overboard, and not only a little. Hurriedly, she jumped back and sat on her futon.

She needed to calm down. She hadn't meant to hurt or worry Kiryu, no way. She just hated it when anything to do with masculinity was assimilated with her, which knowing of Goromi's background, was not that surprising.

"Sorry. I know you're not a bad person, I overreacted. I never meant to scare ya", Goromi rambled, speaking so fast Kiryu had a hard time following her. Was Kiryu just imagining or was there few teardrops under her eye?

"I meant to call you beautiful but... Uh... It's hard to say", Kiryu said awkwardly, feeling his cheeks blushing.

"Well, it is one long ass words with way too many vowels in a row, I agree", Goromi agreed, letting out a little forced giggle to lighten the atmosphere. Kiryu smiled at her joke.

They both fell silent. Goromi was busy calming herself up from that sudden burst of intense emotions, and Kiryu was trying to find ways to make her feel better. He looked around for clues. A framed photograph on the shelf caught his attention. It was a group of girls, about ten of them. Everyone was wearing long pink jackets, and a few of them had baseball bats. Most of the girls had dyed hair, blonde or bright neon colors. There was no doubt that the blonde girl in the middle with a fancy scooter was no one than Goromi

herself. Kiryu could recognize another girl as well, the one from the beach, Tatsu, if Kiryu remembered her name.

“Is this the baseball club you were in before joining Akiyama’s nap club?” Kiryu asked, picking the framed photo from the shelf and showing it to Goromi.

“Baseball club?” she repeated Kiryu’s words.

“Saejima said you were in one, and you left because of some disagreements”, Kiryu explained.

“Oh, he believed that bullshit about ‘Girls only battin’ club’. That, or he just didn’t want ya to know. Anyway, that photo right there was my gang, Motor Mistresses. I formed the school club just so we could carry around baseball bats for self-defense, and more importantly, to look badass”, Goromi laughed. This time her joy was genuine, although somewhat wistful.

“I remember you mentioned them earlier. I didn’t know Tatsu was a member too. What happened to the other girls?” Kiryu asked.

“We went to our different ways. Most of them either joined in new gangs, few of them got their shit together, two of them moved away and one... The girl next to me with short brown hair, Park was her name, died”, Goromi told, her joy fading away again as she mentioned the passing of her friend.

“I’m sorry”, Kiryu said, placing his hand on Goromi’s shoulder.

“We had our disagreements, sure, but damn, I loved her. And she went and died and I didn’t have the chance

to say sorry for our last disagreement”, she spoke. Listening to her words was painful, her voice was on a verge of breaking.

“How old was she?” Kiryu asked.

“Too young. I was on my second year when that photo was taken, and she wasn’t even in high school yet. She just... ended up hanging with us anyway”, Goromi explained, her eye still glued to the photograph.

“What happened?” Kiryu couldn’t help himself from asking. “You don’t have to tell if it’s a difficult subject.”

“It’s fine, I suppose. Y’see, there was this race I had organized to establish dominance, nothin’ special about that. Part of it was ‘cause Park was ‘bout to swap gangs after one particularly nasty fight we had. I wanted to prove to her I’m still the toughest bitch on the block. Next thing I know, I sit on my bike, some douchebag next to me on his, Park hangin’ on to this fella like her life depended on it. We we’re on this dead end road by a cliff and I realized it was a fuckin’ chicken dare. I didn’t want to lose, but I also didn’t wanna die, so I was the first to hit the brakes. And I still fell down the cliff. My competitor, who never braked in the end, flew right off the cliff, Park with her. Her scream right before she died is still hauntin’ me to this day. When I finally managed to crawl to her body, I knew both she and the guy were done for”, Goromi told. From how well she still remembered the details, Kiryu was sure not a day went by she could’ve forgotten about that faithful night.

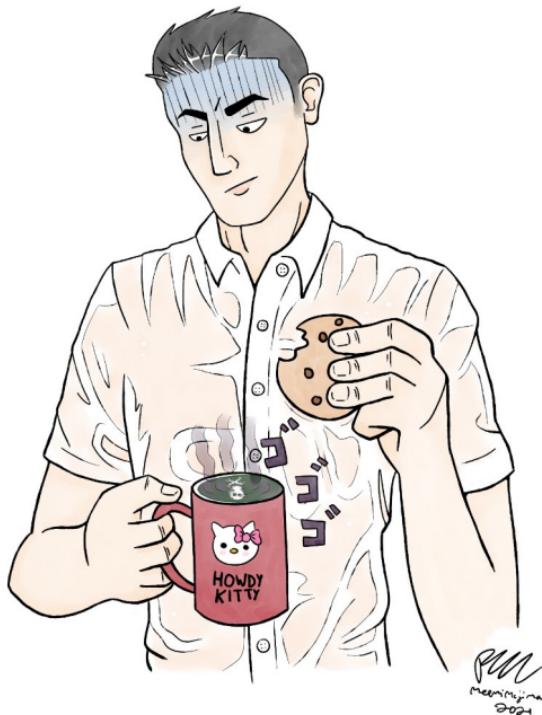
"That's terrible", Kiryu said, too shocked to say much else to this story. There sure had been a lot to process. "I appreciate you telling me this."

Goromi smiled and laid her head on Kiryu's shoulder. Kiryu's hand moved on its own and reached to caress Goromi's hair. Kiryu's hand knew better than the boy controlling that limb, that this was exactly what Goromi needed right now.

"I've been savin' up for a new bike. Wanna go for a ride some day?" she suggested.

"After all that, you still wanna drive?" Kiryu asked, surprised by this idea.

"We'll avoid any cliffs and we'll be fine. I know I'm in safe hands whenever I'm with you."



## EPISODE 9

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Let that girl rock n roll

The school grounds were barely recognizable upon the day of the school festival. There were stands all around, some selling usual festival treats like takoyaki or dangos, and others just promoting club activities and attracting new members. Kiryu's class was doing a sort of snack bar, and because Saejima had already decided to disband the gardening club once this year had ran its course, Kiryu had an easy day upon himself. Just wrap up some hamburgers and hot dogs and maybe catch a change to visit by the maid cafe. Goromi had insisted she would come up with any excuse to avoid this humiliation bestowed upon her, but Kiryu had a feeling Saejima might have forced her to participate.

Kiryu wasn't the only one somewhat excited about the maid cafe. As soon as Ryuji had heard the news about Goromi's role he had to make sure to keep Kiryu too busy to see her. No, Ryuji hadn't still given up on that girl, not even after the beach party. At least the kanji for 'aho' on his forehead was long gone by now.

Ryuji was enjoying this snack food bar business quite a lot. He had insisted they would go for American 50s aesthetic, and everyone else had either been indifferent or too afraid of him to speak against the idea, so he had gotten his will through quite easily. Kiryu didn't mind it too much, although wearing skin-tight jeans was uncomfortable, and it upset Nishiki when Kiryu had used most of his hair gel on that stupid pompadour hair.

"You still look like a nerd", Ryuji whispered to Kiryu. "And there's no way a cool chick like Goromi would like nerds."

Kiryu swallowed his pride for now and said nothing back, as he still wasn't entirely sure if Goromi had hopes for joining with the Rockin' Cockatoos. If Kiryu would've wanted, he could've told all about just how much he was spending time with Goromi, but knew pissing Ryuji off now would only make the rest of the day unbearable.

"Sorry, no time for arguing I need to go check on the hot dog wieners", Kiryu said calmly, walking right past Ryuji, leaving him wondering why Kiryu wasn't threatened the slightest.

Little did Ryuji know, that Kiryu was about to sneak out. Not for a long time, just enough to check if Goromi

was in the maid cafe few classrooms away. He would order a quick cup of coffee and return to the snack bar before Ryuji would've even realized Kiryu had been gone to begin with.

By the door to the maid cafe there was a boy student dressed as a butler.

"Good day, my sir. Any particular maid you'd like to request?" he spoke while bowing down for Kiryu.

"Is Goromi available?" Kiryu asked straight away. The butler seemed awfully delighted for some reason, which was soon clear to Kiryu.

"Finally. She's been going on about someone coming to see her, refusing to come out before seeing you", he explained, holding the door open for Kiryu who passed him by to enter the cafe.

The classroom wasn't recognizable. It was elegant, on every desk there was a velvet tablecloth, walls filled with classical paintings and smooth jazz was playing from the speakers. All the windows were covered with thick black curtains to hide the boring reality, after all, this was but a fantasy world.

Kiryu couldn't even sit down before he saw Goromi peeking at him from behind a door. She had an agonizing expression on her face as she approached Kiryu.

"Kiryu-chan!" she greeted, trying to sound as happy as she only could under the situation. Kiryu could tell she hated every second of this humiliation.

“Goromi. Wow, you look... different”, Kiryu exhaled. Goromi had her hair in twin buns and she wore a black and white maid dress and long, white socks reaching well above her knees.

“Not another word”, she shushed, leaning against the table and not even bothering to sit down. “I tried, I really did, but I can’t fuckin’ take this shit. Come with me to the backroom. If anyone asks, you’re there helpin’ me with the dress. We gonna make a run for it.”

And without another word, she grabbed Kiryu by his forearm and dragged towards the door she had just arrived from. Everyone was too busy to give two thoughts about this. Goromi pulled the door shut behind them.

“We don’t have much time, someone can bust in any second. See that window up there? Lift me up and climb after me”, she instructed. There was a small window high up in the wall, barely big enough to fit through. “No peekin’, but ya oughta know that by now.”

Kiryu gave Goromi a lift to reach the window before he had barely processed the words. They were really gonna go through this? After Goromi had squeezed through the window (she was petite so there was no problem other than her big dress), Kiryu jumped on a wooden crate and followed right behind her.

The weather had taken a turn for worse since the morning. It was moist; the sky was gray, and the sun was nowhere to be seen.

"I swear if it starts rainin' my day is ruined", Goromi sighed, looking at the sky.

"We're gonna get into some serious trouble", Kiryu said back at Goromi. He knew he could still go back, but somehow he felt like seeing just what would happen from here. This must've been the forbidden fruit they had always warned him about.

"You're sayin' that now? If you're a wuss, fine, I don't hold it against ya if you head back", Goromi shrugged.

"No... I... I'll stay with you. What are we gonna do?" Kiryu insisted.

"Follow me", Goromi said, leading Kiryu to the school's parking lot behind the school building. There were a couple of cars (including Saejima's pickup truck), plenty of scooters and mopeds and even more bicycles.

Goromi had stopped by a pink motorcycle, decorated with cute Howdy Kitty stickers, some of which she had drawn eyepatches with permanent marker just for that extra measure of badassery. Before Kiryu could ask anything, Goromi already sat on the seat.

"So, what do ya think of my new ride? Pretty sweet, huh? Wanna go for a ride?" she spoke, clearly happy to show off her new bike to Kiryu.

"If we're already in trouble, we should probably try to escape as far as we can", Kiryu said, a new kind of excitement brewing inside him. Goromi grinned upon hearing Kiryu's words.

"Now you're speakin' my language. Hop on and hold tight!" she cheered, revving up the exceptionally loud

engine. Whether she had modified it to be obnoxiously loud or it had been like that to begin with, Kiryu wasn't sure. He didn't know much about motorcycles, other than that they were fast and required a talented driver. As much as Kiryu trusted Goromi, he wrapped his hands around her waist tight to for extra safety measure.

(Disclaimer: This is a work of fantasy so no one gets hurt unless author so wishes, so helmets are ignored for the sake of aesthetics here. However, if you're using any kind of bike in real life, please use a helmet. Alone the fact you're reading this means you are a valid and cool person, definitely one with head worth of protecting.)

Fast bike underneath the two of them, the world was but an endless adventure just waiting to be explored and conquered. Kiryu had no idea where they were going, and truth to be told, neither had Goromi. She turned every now and then off from the main road when she felt like it, but she had no specific spot she wanted to end up in. So far the author had been merciful and not summoned rain clouds to ruin their day, but whether that would happen later, neither of them knew.

Goromi cherished the freedom she felt sitting behind the handlebar. The wind blowing back her bleacher hair; the roads waiting to be drove further, there was no greater feeling than that. And having the boy you had had a crush for half a year by now hanging on to you, squeezing your ribs to bruises, that was just a bonus.

About two hours later Goromi didn't feel so unstoppable. There was a very unpleasant feeling of hunger creeping up on her.

"Are ya hungry?" she yelled to Kiryu still clinging to her.

"Yeah" he responded, which only confirmed Goromi's decision for a break. At this point, she wasn't entirely sure where they were, which was only for the best, because she certainly didn't want to show up to any of her local haunts dressed as a maid.

Soon enough she spotted a ramen restaurant by the road. Ramen was fast and affordable, so that was just the perfect spot for some lunch. As Goromi stepped inside, Kiryu right after her footsteps, the chef greeted them with a curious look in his eyes.

"Isn't it a bit too late for Halloween?" he laughed. He hadn't meany to offend his customers, he only wanted to break the ice. Nothing to work up the appetite like good laughter.

"It's culture festival day", Kiryu explained, reaching to his pockets. Damn it, he had forgotten his wallet back at school in his school bag. The look of disbelief on Goromi's face revealed something similar enough had happened to her as well.

"Oh shit! What are we gonna do?" Goromi asked, showing her hand holding only a few sorry coins. Kiryu had had just a little more luck turning over his pockets.

All he had was chance from few orders he had sold during the snack bar back at school. They both laid all the coins they had on the counter where the chef eyed them, doing some quick maths. Goromi was the first to speak up. "Is this enough for a meal?"

There was no way there was enough, but the chef smiled.

"I'll cook you lovers something", he promised.

"We're not—" Kiryu tried to correct, but the chef had already moved to the kitchen.

Kiryu and Goromi, who seemed awfully giggly after being called Kiryu's lover, seated in a table for two. The restaurant's interiors were rather modest, furniture were mostly wooden and walls had black and white photography of scenery of Japanese sights from forty years ago. Besides them two, there was but a one customer, seated by the counter. He was an older man, slurping down the remains of his ramen, praising the chef just how heavenly this noodle soup was, almost as good as his late wife used to make.

It didn't take long for the meal to be delivered to their table. The chef laid out a single, big bowl of ramen with two pair of chopsticks in between these young clients and two tall glasses of water with slices of lemon and ice cubes.

"Enjoy your meal", he said as he walked away.

"Looks delicious!" Goromi sighed in awe, breaking her wooden chopsticks apart. "He was really kind to

offer us this. I know I suck at math but even I know there couldn't've been enough money for this."

Kiryu followed Goromi's example and dug right into the bowl of noodles. He was starving. Goromi's bangs brushed against Kiryu's forehead as they both leaned above the bowl, trying not to make too much of a mess from slurping down the noodles sunk in tasty pork broth.

The meal was almost eaten, there were but few strings of noodle left. Kiryu picked the end between his chopsticks and began sucking it in. Goromi did the same, and before neither of them could realize, the tips of their noses touched their lips almost met.

Kiryu was the first to fall back, feeling suddenly very hot, blaming it in the generous amount of chili in the broth.

"I thought this could only happen in Dickney movies..." Goromi sighed, her face almost as red as her lips.

"You mean the one with two dogs who eat spaghetti?" Kiryu specified, remembering seeing a movie like that back when he was but a kid himself.

"Yeah, that one! Kinda romantic, isn't it?" Goromi said back, smiling at Kiryu.

"Silly movie. Dogs shouldn't eat spaghetti, dogs eat dog food", Kiryu laughed awkwardly. "You can eat the rest, I think I had bit too much chili. I'm feeling very hot suddenly. I think I'll wait you outside."

Goromi laughed at Kiryu, but didn't resist slurping down the rest of that tasty ramen broth. She just couldn't understand how Kiryu could be so clueless. She'd really have to try even harder just to make him see how she really felt.

Little did Kiryu know what Goromi was thinking, and that author desperately wanted Goromi's wishes of romance to come true. When they left the awfully welcoming establishment, it was raining, and what was initially but a small drizzle, would cook up to be a proper storm soon. Goromi twisted the gas handle, driving against the speed limit, after all, what was it but a police officer's opinion?

"We gotta seek shelter. Ain't no way I'm drivin' any further weather like this", she finally admitted, stopping by an abandoned warehouse building. By the time the rain had reached them, they had already left the central city and were now on the edge of the city in an industrial neighborhood. The buildings were tall and big, it was incredibly easy to get lost in there, especially now when everything was gray and it was raining so hard you couldn't see much ahead.

Goromi had a plan. She steered to one particularly empty looking parking lot and parked her bike there.

"That door's boarded shut. We break and enter there, wait the rain out and drive back to school", she told to Kiryu, who clearly detested the idea.

“That’s illegal”, he pointed out, looking around him as if he was expecting cops to jump on them for even thinking about plan like this.

“Y’know what else is illegal? Ya stealin’ my bike and drivin’ away without a license, ‘cause I ain’t goin’ back in this weather. Wet asphalt is risky, trust me, I know”, Goromi said, doing her best to convince Kiryu.

“I don’t know... I could take a taxi”, Kiryu tried to counter-argument, knowing it was pointless. He had no money, and neither did Goromi.

“It’ll be fine. I’ve done this before. Listen, if shit would hit the fan and we’d get caught, which totally will not happen, I’ll take the blame. You’re my hostage or somethin’. Just come with me before I have to drag your ass in”, Goromi demanded. Kiryu knew by now there was no way out of this situation, other than to follow Goromi’s plan. He knew he had already broken countless rules today, what bad could breaking just a few more do at this point.

“There’s an emergency exit door, see? Let’s try if we can get it open”, Kiryu suggested the least violent method of entry he could think of. Walking through an unlocked door was a lot better (and safer) than driving through an entire wall open with a bulldozer.

Goromi laid her hand on the door handle and pulled it down.

“Locked”, she told. This was very much expected.

“So, what now?” Kiryu asked, looking around for another peaceful way to enter.

“Ya think I’d give up that easily? I know few handy tricks, watch and learn”, she grinned. “If ya lift the door like this while clicking the handle down three times, it should open the lock no matter what.”

The door remained shut.

“Then, the next step is to knock the door. The vibrations should undo the finer mechanisms which the previous trick didn’t move for some fuckin’ bullshit reason.”

The door was still locked.

“And if all else fails, take a bobby pin like this one”, Goromi continued, pulling out a thin pin from her already wet hair. “Shove it right in the lock, give it a gentle twist like this...”

The bobby pin snapped in half and part of it was now stuck inside the lock’s chamber.

“Or ya just get a fuckin’ master key like this and smash the stupid door open like ya should’ve done in the first place”, she was almost yelling at this point, smacking the lock with a tire iron which she had picked up just next to the door. The lock finally gave in (as well as half of the door) and they were in.

The interiors were a lot drier than anything on outside, but that was the only improvement. It was cold and pitch dark; the air smelled of rust, and top it all off, there was dust and dirt everywhere. It was clear this place had been abandoned for at least ten years, which only became more obvious as Goromi’s lighter showed a calendar from year 1983 on a wall.

“So, now we just wait it out?” Kiryu asked, looking around as his eyes got somewhat used to the lack of light. There were few big industrial windows, but they were boarded shut.

“That’s the plan”, Goromi replied, walking around. What she was looking for, she wasn’t entirely sure. Top priority for now was to get some lights in here, preferably by stealthier means than finding a master switch which would light up the entire building like a Christmas tree. “Wait here, I’ll have a look around, we need some light.”

Kiryu sat down on a cardboard box. There was quite many of them stacked in the corner, and around them was lingering a rather curious smell. One of the boxes was open, and Kiryu carefully felt the contents. Something round and quite thin, like a carrot, but waxier.

“No need to go anywhere. I think this is a candle factory”, he said to Goromi, showing her the candles he had just found.

“Really? Well, that’s pretty fuckin’ convenient. I mean, of course I already knew it, just wanted to see how long until ya figure it out...” she replied as she lit the candle. Empty lemonade bottle on the floor made for a great make-shift candlestick. Candles were just the thing Goromi had hoped to stumble upon. They weren’t too bright to attract unwanted attention, they brought warmth and worked under most situations, unlike

something like a flashlight which could run out of batteries on the most troublesome time.

Now that the lights were taken care of, they could both focus on exploring this abandoned warehouse, as there was nothing better to do. The high walls and lack of any fabrics made sure even the smallest of whispers would echo around and careful footsteps sounded like an army rather than two runaway students. The open halls and long hallways would've been perfect for a game of tag, if only they had had some more light. At least it would've kept them warm. With their clothes soaked and no heating inside, they both started feeling cold.

"Wonder if there's a kitchen?" Goromi thought out loud.

"Probably", Kiryu replied. If there was, it should've been somewhere quite near, as they had just passed by the dressing room and bathrooms.

The staff room, closest thing to the kitchen this facility had, was indeed just a few doors away, and it didn't take them too long to find their way there. All the furniture, the few tables and benches, as well as counters were just as dusty as everything else. Out of curiosity rather than need, Kiryu started checking through the cabinets. He stumbled upon just what he had expected, mugs with the company logos printed on them, some left-behind snacks which were probably hazardous at this point and some tea and honey. Goromi, who rummaged through the other side of the room found some pots and pans, and most importantly, a kettle.

“Tea time!” Goromi announced. Kiryu wasn’t sure he was too fond of idea, but the cold seeking into his bones made him realize that drinking Goromi’s tea, as terrible as it would be, would still be better than death from pneumonia or hypothermia.

“This stuff is old, but it smells alright”, Kiryu said, showing the container of tea leaves he had found.

“How about the honey?” Goromi asked, already gathering up some newspapers from the tables and picking up a single wooden chair, which she would chop into some firewood.

“Honey never goes bad”, Kiryu told, carrying the tea utensils back to the main hall where Goromi was taking the chair. Little did Goromi know Kiryu had learned the fact from Saejima, who had given Kiryu quite a lecture after shooing off some bees from the rosebushes they had planted in the school. Gotta protect the ecosystem and let everything live in its own phase, something like that.

It must’ve been all those years of delinquency, Goromi really had a knack for breaking stuff. It didn’t take her long at all to shatter the chair to tiny bits. Kiryu gathered few bricks and cinder blocks to contain the fire within a limited area, after all, they didn’t want to vandalize, just survive.

“Where are we gonna get the water? The electricity is cut off, same with water I’d guess”, Kiryu pointed out.

“Leave the kettle outside, it’s rainin’, shouldn’t take too long for it to get full”, Goromi suggested after a

while of thinking. “While we’re at it, might scavenge around for new clothes. First, this ain’t my style at all, and second, I’m fuckin’ freezin’ my ass off.”

Kiryu left the task of setting a fire for Goromi, who after all was the one with the lighter, and headed himself towards the dressing rooms. Luckily enough, there was a cardboard box of unused work overalls. He picked up the entire box, as he wasn’t sure what size Goromi would want to wear.

“I’m not sure if these will be your style either, but at least they’re dry”, Kiryu announced his comeback, laying the box on the ground. Goromi began shuffling through the overalls, a disappointed look on her face.

“These are all men’s clothin”, she sighed.

“I know. I’m sorry. I guess this must’ve been men only facility”, Kiryu tried to comfort her, to no avail whatsoever. “Fine, I will go back to double check, but don’t get your hopes up.”

Whether Kiryu had been careless the first time he checked the room through, or if a miracle had happened, but he found one pair of overalls, that wasn’t navy blue, but red instead, almost the same shade than Goromi’s trademark lipstick. That’d have to do, as Kiryu found nothing else aside from slippers and baseball caps. They wouldn’t offer much warmth, so he left them behind, at least for now.

“Is this good enough?” Kiryu asked, handing Goromi the red overalls. There was a spark of joy in her eye and smile arose on her face.

“It’s... beautiful”, she sighed, already stripping down her dress before even taking time to warn Kiryu, who caught a glimpse of her in nothing but white and pink striped bras and panties. Kiryu turned his head away out reflex more than out of politeness. He had seen her in bikini before, so how was underwear any different from that? He felt blush up in his cheeks only from this peek, imagine what staring would’ve done to his poor, innocent soul. To get something else to think about, he started changing into something more comfortable as well.

“Well, aren’t ya a sight for the sore eye?” Goromi asked, her eye adventuring on Kiryu who was wearing nothing boxer briefs and socks this very moment.

“Hey, why you’re allowed to look but I’m not?” Kiryu called Goromi out, who only giggled.

“I never said ya couldn’t look”, she grinned, already zipping up her overalls. The fit of the outfit was loose, but not too big. The color matched perfectly with her lipstick, just as Kiryu had expected.

“It doesn’t feel right, looking at you changing”, Kiryu defended himself and his innocence, or whatever he’d have left of it after today’s misadventures, anyway.

“Ya really are a virgin, aren’t ya?” Goromi sighed, but it was not a frustrated sigh, if something, a rather amused one.

“No, my birthday is in June, actually. What does that make me, was it Gemini?” Kiryu said back with a straight face.

“Oh my God”, Goromi laughed out loud, wiping tears of joy from the corner of her eye. “You’re so fuckin’ adorable.”

Tea only warmed them up for twenty minutes. Soon they found themselves shivering again. Keeping the fire up was risky, even in building as big as this. It could easily get out of hand, and the carbon monoxide would be lethal if inhaled too much. They had to come up with other means to stay warm, as the rain was still banging against the steel-plated roof. Well, at least it wasn’t leaking that much.

“So, what do we do next?” Kiryu asked, looking at Goromi who was clearly suffering from the cold.

“There are few ways to stay warm, y’know, but under the current situation, I’d say bodily contact would be our best bet. It’s stealthy and easily accessible”, she suggested, raising her eyebrows, hoping Kiryu to catch the hint.

“You mean like hugging?” Kiryu clarified.

“Eh... Somethin’ like that, yeah. We could pull down some of those curtains from the break room and use them as a blanket”, Goromi planned. Wording attempts at cuddling innocently like that, he’d be snuggled up with Kiryu in no time.

Soon Kiryu and Goromi had a not-so-fancy makeshift bed at their disposal. They had laid a curtain on the break room couch, rolled up a couple of those work overalls as pillows, and then there was another curtain

acting as a blanket. It was definitely not the most comfortable thing neither of them had slept on, but it had to do for now. Goromi was the first one to lie down, as Kiryu still had one more measure to perform before the time skip in form of a nap. He began taking off the overalls which he had only gotten on in the last scene, as both his and Goromi's clothes were hanging on a makeshift hanging rack by the embers of their campfire.

"What are ya doin'?" Goromi asked, looking at Kiryu undressing.

"As odd as it sounds, it's warmer without clothes", Kiryu explained.

"Now you're bullshittin' me", Goromi laughed, snuggling up under the blanket.

"I know it sounds silly, but Saejima told me all about it. I have a feeling he knows this better than either of us", Kiryu insisted, thinking back to that camping trip. Saejima had marathoned book after book of survival tips to the most extreme situations they were very unlikely to face, like what to do if you get stuck in a blizzard.

"Saejima, huh? Bro, ya sly bastard, I owe ya a dinner once we get outta here", Goromi muttered, her words so muffled Kiryu wasn't able to make sense any of it.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

"Nothin'. Yeah, I fully trust Saejima in this", Goromi lied, shuffling off her red overalls and tossing them over the cabinet next to the couch. "I wanna be the little spoon. Please?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about but okay. I feel safer my back against the wall anyway", Kiryu agreed, laying down on the couch. Goromi got in front of him, and to much of Kiryu's surprise, she got awfully close. The couch must've been smaller than it had looked like just moments before. "Can you get any further?"

"No. Even now it feels like I'll drop any second now", she sighed. Before she had fully realized what was happening, she felt Kiryu's arm wrapping around her waist. She didn't know Kiryu only did this to protect her from unwanted contact with the floor. Bruises or in even worse case, fractures would make it much harder to get back home. Of course underneath that all there was also care.

Goromi's body was burning hot against Kiryu's mostly bare skin. Her breathing was heavy as if she would've been really excited about something. Kiryu knew he had to keep his head cool now that he was so close with Goromi, so that the worst imaginable accident wouldn't happen. Being half-naked and in close contact like this, it was more than likely to get an unwanted rush of blood to underpants.

Kiryu tried, as stealthily as possible, to adjust the blanket so there was at least few layers of it separating their hips, just for extra safety. He kept thinking about his chemistry homework to keep his brain busy as well.

"Your heart's beating pretty fast, are you alright?" Kiryu worried. He felt every breath Goromi took, every

beat of her heart against his own body. He had never held someone as close as this, but for some reason, this felt so right.

“Yeah. It’s... I’m just very sensitive to caffeine, that’s all”, Goromi said, her words somewhat slurred, as if she had already met with the Sandman.

As much as Kiryu thought about chemistry, he wasn’t able to count up one and one, and that over-sensitivity to caffeine, if being the actual issue here, would’ve also stopped Goromi from sleeping. No, he had bought this white lie like student buys discount tuna at the end of the month. Initially, both the suddenly very shy Goromi and Kiryu, the romantically clueless protagonist, fell asleep, holding each other tight as one could without breaking some bones and leaving bruises as memories to follow.

Goromi was the first one to get up. By the time she woke Kiryu up, she had already gotten dressed in the red overalls, tossing the still wet maid outfit towards the nearest trashcan. She never wanted to such clothing ever again.

“Yo, wake up. The rain’s over, time to go home”, she spoke softly, her hands not as softly poking Kiryu awake.

“Any idea what time it is?” were the first words to leave Kiryu’s lips.

“No. It’s starting to get dark outside, so I’d say it’s at least five by now”, Goromi told, pointing toward the nearest window.

“Okay, we gotta hurry. My bro’s gonna be worried sick”, Kiryu said, rushing up and running to the main hall to get dressed. His clothes weren’t yet fully dry, but at least they weren’t dripping anymore. Kiryu made a mental memo to never try putting on a pair of wet skinny jeans, it was an excruciating task, and he even let out the first f-bomb of his life, which amused Goromi a lot.

Goromi drove fast and somewhat recklessly, but Kiryu couldn’t once bring himself to be afraid for his life. No, he trusted Goromi, probably even more than she deserved.

Kiryu had been so worried over Nishiki’s reaction, that he had totally forgotten that something even worse could still happen. Neither of Kiryu nor Goromi had expected that someone would still be at school by the time they drove there. The headmistress stood there at the edge of the parking light under a street lamp.

“Where have you two been? No excuses. You’re gonna be in so much trouble.”

## E P I S O D E   1 0

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Homework was never quite like this

Kiryu had never been as ashamed as he was feeling now, walking towards the headmistress' office. He had never been punished for breaking the rules, so what were the odds it would happen upon the very first time he tried his luck.

"Kiryu, I'm disappointed in you", the headmistress spoke, sitting behind a big wooden desk, resting upon her arms. Yayoi Dojima was a strict, yet kind ruler of the school Kiryu was the student of.

"I'm disappointed in myself too, if that makes any difference", Kiryu spoke, choosing the path of regret and modesty, hoping it would make his punishment less severe.

"I hoped as much. There's potential in you. You're smart, your grades are good and you've fit in well", the headmistress continued. "It's just the company you stick to that's worrying me."

"Can we not do this again? I've heard nothing but lecture—" Kiryu threw his modest attitude right out of the window upon hearing more mockery of Goromi. He had grown so tired of it by now. If even the headmistress herself was this judgmental, she was not worthy of Kiryu's respect.

"No, that was not my point. You see, I'm willing to make an exception with you. Usually, we'd call your parents, give you detention, that kind of things. But seeing how well you come along with Goromi, all that I, no, all the school staff ask of you, is to make sure she passes her exams so she won't spend additional year here with us."

The evening of unusual detention arrived a week after the meeting with the headmistress. Kiryu was supposed to meet Goromi in an empty classroom on the second floor. By the time he stumbled there, Goromi already sat there by a school desk, waiting for her tutor to come.

Kiryu dragged another school desk just next to hers and sat down.

"What subject do you need the most help with?" he asked, unloading all of his books from his schoolbag.

"Are you for real?" Goromi laughed, searching through her bag and laying a pile of books on her desk.

They were in pretty terrible shape. “I’m not even sure if these are the right books. Or mine to begin with.”

Indeed, there were books in the pile that stood out, first year geography, colored guide for mushrooms of Japan and few mangas such as BoBo’s Peculiar Adventure and something called Claudia with beautiful boy in the cover.

Kiryu had known well enough that Goromi was low on motivation, but hadn’t considered the situation to be this bad. He’d really need a miracle to survive through this. Miracle, or some heavy dedication, which latter was definitely more likely to happen.

“Okay, how about we start with some math?” Kiryu suggested, picking up the topmost book of the pile on her desk.

“Ugh... Fine. But I’m only willin’ to try it ‘cause it’s ya who’s teachin’ me”, Goromi sighed, opening the book. Kiryu knew he wasn’t even supposed to know this stuff yet, he was two years behind Goromi. But by doing his best now, he could at least say he tried.

“Don’t be so sour. With attitude like that, it’s much harder to progress if you’ve already decided to hate this”, he said, shuffling through the pages to see something he would understand enough to help Goromi with.

“Sorry... This stuff’s just hard. How the fuck am I supposed to know what x means if the definition of it keeps changing every fuckin’ problem?” she asked, opening her notebook where she was supposed to solve these equations. She had filled the pages with cutesy, yet

somewhat messy letters and numbers. And lots of doodles at the corners, hearts, cool weapons and big-eyed, heart-warmingly adorable animals.

“Didn’t know you liked to draw. That dog’s pretty cool”, Kiryu said, thinking compliment would cheer her up. It did. “I know these make little sense in real-life situation, they’re mostly taught us to help us develop our logical thinking skills.”

“Hey, I’m a girl, I don’t do logic”, Goromi giggled.

“That’s an idiotic thing to say. You should always try to live to your best potential, and not limit yourself, especially if the only reason to do so is something as ridiculous as societal norms”, Kiryu started lecturing. He couldn’t stand Goromi talking herself down like this. She was a smart girl, if only more than a little unconventional and a bit too rebellious for her own good.

“Fine, sorry. I was just jokin’, jeez”, Goromi apologized, feeling ashamed to get called out like this. “About that... There’s one thing I’ve been meanin’ to tell ya for a while... Nah, I guess it’ll have to wait then. We have some math to do, right?”

“That’s the attitude I was hoping for. So, how would you solve this?” Kiryu asked, pointing at a math problem on the page of Goromi’s book:

$$5(-3x - 2) - (x - 3) = -4(4x + 5) + 13$$

“Hmm... That’s a good question”, Goromi said, eyeing the numbers and marks on the paper. She was somewhat offended Kiryu didn’t even bother asking what this secret of hers was, but maybe it only proved just how much he wanted to help her. “No idea. Can ya at least give me a hint? There’s too much goin’ on.”

“Brackets come first, multiplications and divides next and adding and subtracting is the last part”, Kiryu advised.

“Alright... What am I supposed to make of those brackets, anyway? None of this makes sense”, she sighed, first signs of defeat shining through her voice. “Give me a hand here, wouldja?”

Kiryu reached to grab Goromi’s hand.

“That’s odd thing to ask for, but if that’s what it takes to guide you through this, fine. Do you at least now what five times three is?” Kiryu said, pointing the spoken numbers with Goromi’s hand laying across the book’s tattered page.

“Eight... No wait, it’s fifteen, right?” Goromi asked, her voice unusually high. For some reason, Kiryu thought of a violin string that was being just a tad too tight and was about to snap. Was it math that made Goromi so tense?

“You’re correct. Now do the same with the rest of the numbers. Multiply them with the very first number.”

Few moments and help-requesting looks later, the equation now looked like this:

$$-15x - 10 - x + 3 = -16x + 20 + 13$$

“See, you’re making progress!” Kiryu cheered, softly stroking the back of Goromi’s hand.

“I meant it figuratively, the part about holdin’ hands, by the way. But thanks for the help”, she laughed, relieved she was still alive after all this math.

Kiryu pulled his hand back and felt a blush raising up to his face. He had thought this to be rather unique request, but knowing Goromi, she had always been a kind of unpredictable girl to begin with.

“Sorry...” Kiryu muttered. Goromi’s smile told there was no need for apologies. “Any idea what to do next?”

“I guess now to solve the x? How do I do that, I have no idea, that equation still looks like Hebrew to me”, Goromi shrugged.

“Group up the similar terms. Basically, numbers with x’s and numbers without x’s. Like there’s negative fifteen x’s, and later there’s one more negative x”, Kiryu explained. Goromi still seemed puzzled, but did just as Kiryu had instructed, and eventually got the numbers right:

$$-16x - 7 = -16x - 7$$

“Do you notice anything by now?” Kiryu asked, as Goromi was staring the numbers she had just written on the paper.

“They’re the same?” she suggested. Kiryu nodded.

“And do you know what that means?” Kiryu pushed Goromi further, to see just how much she understood of this by now.

“We still haven’t solved the  $x$ ?” she pointed out. Kiryu nodded again. “But we already know these two are the same, don’t we? What’s the point to continue?”

“Alright, I think you understood it well enough. If these are the same,  $x$  can mean any number”, Kiryu explained the math book version of Goromi’s words.

“Wait a second. Does that mean we just did all of this shit to know that one equals one?” Goromi rephrased Kiryu’s last words. Kiryu nodded. Goromi didn’t even try to hide her despair. This was gonna be a long evening.

A few hours and a few more math problems later, Goromi felt like if she would close her eyes she’d see nothing but numbers and mathematical graphs running all around her head. Kiryu’s level of exhaustion was on similar levels.

“Was there any other subject you struggle with? It’s getting pretty late”, Kiryu yawned, looking out of the window as he did a little stroll around the classroom to stretch his limbs and clear his thoughts. The sun was already down and street lights shined like stars.

“All of ‘em”, Goromi said, laying on her desk.

“You’re not kidding by any chance, are you?” Kiryu checked. Goromi didn’t smile like she usually did when messing around with Kiryu’s good will. “I ‘d love to help

you, really, but there's only so much I know. You're two years ahead of me."

"I'm a lost cause, aren't I?" she laughed bitterly, her head hanging heavily on her arms.

"No, don't say that. All I'm saying that I'm not the best teacher, that's all", Kiryu tried to comfort Goromi.

"Well, at least you've taught me enough math to count up the cash I make while dancin' around. Now all I need is a cool stripper name. Any ideas on that end?" Goromi kept continuing on her chosen path of self-pity. Every time she spoke of herself like that, it ached Kiryu's soul. If only he could convince her just how talented girl she truly was.

"You mean like an exotic dancer? I'm not sure if I could never imagine you doing that", Kiryu said.

"Why not? Is it because I'm different?" Goromi sighed. Kiryu's trust in her frustrated her. "Look at me. I'm not like them other girls."

Kiryu looked at Goromi. Her facial expression told stories of anguish, of pain, of just what it felt like to be lost. As strong-willed and energetic as she was, Kiryu found no fault in that, if something, it was her haters that had to learn with her being herself and not the other way around.

She got up and stretched her arms high towards the roof. The top of her uniform rose and Kiryu saw the toned stomach with visible muscles. She was tall, slightly taller than Kiryu, especially with the school uniform shoes.

“Okay, maybe you’re not like the other girls. You’re something better. You’re you”, Kiryu finally found the words to say.

Goromi jumped on him to give a tight embrace.

“I know I keep sayin’ this, but you’re so fuckin’ sweet!” she whispered, her voice sounding like she had moved to tears. That confirmed when Kiryu felt something warm and wet against his shoulder. “Ya sure ya don’t want me hangin’ around for one more year?”

“Don’t think that just because we’re in different schools would mean the end of our friendship”, Kiryu comforted Goromi, softly stroking her back to calm her down.

“Friendship, huh? This gives me an idea”, Goromi said after a while, sounding a lot happier already. “Have any plans for the weekend yet? Let’s meet up at my house, I’ll invite Saejima and Akiyama over and ya can all help me cram some of these books in my head.”

They spent the next weekends in Goromi’s apartment, everyone doing their best to help her out. It came to no one as a surprise that Saejima was good with geography, biology and some science, as things didn’t go into minor details like atoms and blood cells. Akiyama was a beast with social studies, economics being his strongest suit. Even Nishiki, who still hadn’t entirely warmed up to Goromi, dropped by once to help her practice her English skills, which he had mostly learned from rock songs their band had covered in various school events.

Kiryu helped with every other subject to his best skill, and if nothing else, he spoke words of encouragement to Goromi, which played an important role.

But today differed from all the previous study sessions. To highlight the passing of the time and to shove in another trope-fest episode, it was now Christmas time. Goromi had invited everyone over, but instead of hitting the books, they would all just gather around the kotatsu, relax, exchange gifts and eat some Texas Fried Chicken.

By the time Kiryu arrived at Goromi's apartment, Akiyama was already there, half asleep under the kotatsu. And of course the host of this evening, Goromi herself. The sheer fact that the kotatsu fit in the room in the first place meant she had cleaned the room, and quick glance around only backed up the fact. Sure, there were still some clothes lying around, but most of the mess was gone.

"It's Kiryu-chan!" Goromi announced, running from under the kotatsu to greet Kiryu with a warm, welcoming hug.

"Merry Christmas", Kiryu replied, as Goromi let go of him. Yet again her outfit surprised Kiryu. He had never seen Goromi looking this elegant. The red, long-sleeved dress with a cutout, and hair tied up in a side ponytail with a big red, glittering hair bow was a beautiful outfit. Seeing Goromi all dressed up, Kiryu didn't feel too silly after wearing something red himself. A red button-up shirt and some light gray dress pants were as fancy as he

felt was appropriate, even though Nishiki had called it a fashion disaster.

“You’re lookin’ extraordinarily handsome today”, Goromi cooed, eyeing Kiryu from head to toe.

“Heh, thanks. You’re looking very pretty today as well”, Kiryu returned the compliment, to which Goromi giggled. “And very red.”

“Wow, you really have a way with words, Kiryu”, Akiyama, who had just woken up, said, walking to greet Kiryu. Following Goromi’s example, he hugged Kiryu too, although this was more of a quick hug than that long embrace with Goromi.

“Merry Christmas for you too, Akiyama”, Kiryu said. “How are you holding up?”

“Ah, just fine. It’s a bit cold outside, but I spoke with the teacher and now I have a permission to sleep in the nap club shack”, Akiyama revealed. He seemed thrilled about this, which was not all that surprising. Just how long he had been homeless, and why exactly, no one knew. Kiryu had meant to ask about it, but now was Christmas, definitely not the time for grim talk like that.

“The nap club shack”? If I remember, they originally built it for the gardenin’ club...” Saejima corrected, walking through the door. How he had got in, no one had any idea, but there he was nonetheless, wearing a black polo sweater and cargo pants. To make it at least a bit Christmassy, he had a pair of black socks with red reindeer. Goromi failed to notice this little detail, apparently.

“Bro, you’re not even dressed up, what a way to ruin the mood ya dumbass!” Goromi yelled at Saejima, who had barely stepped in. There was a hint of affection in her voice, telling she was glad to see Saejima.

“I didn’t know ya had a dress code to get in here, sis”, Saejima laughed, looking at Goromi’s outfit. He seemed very impressed.

“Here, wear this”, she responded, tossing Saejima a red Christmas cap.

“Ugh, do I have to?” he asked. Goromi nodded. Reluctantly, he put it on his head.

“Great, now that the gang’s all here, why don’t ya get comfy in the livin’ room, I’ll make us some tea”, Goromi suggested. Everyone had terrified looks on their faces, most of all Kiryu. As bad as it felt to even think about lying to Goromi, he could excuse it just this once, as it was for the benefit for all of them.

“Why don’t you join your friends. I can take care of it”, he offered, already heading to kitchen.

Kiryu had never been to Goromi’s kitchen before. It seemed strangely normal; it wasn’t even that messy. Sure, there were a few used glasses and mugs in the sink, but not the mess Kiryu had expected. Not even a copy of Bakonomicon was anywhere to be seen, which Kiryu had always thought to be Goromi’s cooking book of choice, considering how just cursed and unworldly her meals had always been. There were a couple of different sorts of tea leaves by the electric kettle, Kiryu opted for the

black tea with bits of cinnamon and ginger, after all, it was Christmas.

Several minutes later he returned to the rest of his friends, all comfortably sitting underneath the kotatsu. Goromi and Saejima were playfully arguing about something that had happened ten years ago, while Akiyama was scrolling through the television channels, stopping for a news broadcast. Nothing of interest had happened, guess he just wanted to stay well-informed on what was going on in the world.

“Here’s the tea”, Kiryu said, laying the four steaming hot cups in his hands on the kotatsu’s surface. Everyone took theirs, thanking Kiryu for his kindness. Little did they know he might have just saved their lives.

After the tea and the takeout TFC (Texas Fried Chicken) Goromi had ordered while Kiryu was making the tea, came time to swap gifts. Kiryu had worried so much for this, if he’d be able to pick something his friends would like. He had tried to ask Nishiki for help, but soon realized Nishiki’s friends differed greatly from Kiryu’s, so he had to do those big decisions on his own.

“I’ll can go first”, Saejima offered, picking up three somewhat hastily packed gifts from behind his back.

“Kiryu, you seem like a guy who always finds himself in trouble. Hope this helps”, Saejima said, handing Kiryu a small package. Kiryu unwrapped it right away, and it turned out to be a multi-tool with gadgets like a knife, screwdriver, file and magnifying glass.

"Wow. This should come in handy", Kiryu thanked Saejima, who smiled friendly.

"Akiyama, I know your livin' situation is what it is, but at least I hope ya can sleep better with this", Saejima continued, handing Akiyama a quite enormous gift. Out of Saejima's gifts, this one was by far the worst wrapped.

Akiyama tore it open and found himself holding an outstanding quality sleeping bag.

"How did you know I've wanted one of these for ages?! Thanks, really", Akiyama spoke, visibly moved by this thoughtful gift, especially when he himself hadn't had the money to bring anything tonight but himself. If only his friends would've known that was already more than enough. Christmas wasn't about exchanging material, it was about friendship and being close with the ones you hold the most dear.

"Whatcha got for me, bro?" Goromi pressured Saejima.

"You've been naughty all year long, seems like Santa's ignorin' ya for this year", Saejima laughed. Seeing the frown on Goromi's face, he pointed out he hadn't been for real. "Just kiddin' sis, here ya go."

It excited Goromi to receive a gift almost as big as Akiyama's. Under the wrapping paper, there was a pink motorcycle helmet with tattoo-like paintwork of a snake. As much as Goromi thought helmets were only for wussies and unskilled drivers, she had to admit that about a year ago, her friend's life might've been saved by

one. Another thing Goromi thought, that the one Saejima had picked was kinda cool.

"Let me go next, alright?" Goromi asked, already giving her first gift to Saejima. Saejima rattled the package curiously, before tearing it open. It was a plastic box of something gold, glittery and most of all, in varying shades of red and pink.

"You bought these 'cause ya thought they were pretty, right?" Saejima laughed, looking at his gift in awe nonetheless. Upon closer inspection, it was a set of high-quality fishing lures.

For Akiyama, Goromi gave a set of woolen beanie hat, a scarf and a pair of mittens to keep him warm during the winter's cold weather. Once again the homeless young man was at a loss of words, after all, he hadn't expected not a single gift.

"As for ya, Kiryu-chan, I have somethin' special", Goromi said, handing Kiryu a small yet surprisingly heavy, beautifully wrapped gift. Kiryu wasn't sure why, but he felt anxious as he opened the package. Knowing Goromi, there could be anything, but her first two gifts had been quite normal, so why would the third one had been any different.

Inside the wrapping paper there was a black box, about a size of a television remote controller. Kiryu opened it.

"It's.... Wow, thanks, Goromi", Kiryu exhaled, staring at the wristwatch he had just unboxed. It seemed to be made of stainless steel and the clock face was red.

"Ya know how many stores I had to go through to find just the perfect one?" Goromi asked. She seemed delighted that Kiryu had liked the gift, as she had worried if watch would be a boring thing to give. Akiyama had insisted that it was a classy gift.

"I appreciate it. This is really neat", Kiryu replied, already putting the watch on his wrist. Goromi offered to help him with it, leaning over the kotatsu.

"No, I meant ya gotta look at the face. It's pretty much the same color as my lipstick, meanin' every time ya check the time you're also thinkin' of me! Isn't it sweet", Goromi explained. Kiryu hadn't even realized this before Goromi had pointed it out, but now he was sure he'd think of her at least a few times a day. (As if he wouldn't have done that already for the past eight months or so...)

The only one who still hadn't given their gifts was Kiryu. First gift he gave was to Akiyama. Kiryu had had a hard time deciding just what to get after knowing of both Saejima's and Goromi's plans, so Kiryu had opted out for sorts of gift basket with various goods like candles (definitely not snatched from the candle factory), couple of coupons to local diners like Hamburger Monarch and Smile Burger, a lottery ticket (hoping it would be a winning one) and a promise of how he could always come and crash on Kiryu's couch if he had nowhere else to go. It had moved Akiyama to tears, all that generosity from his friends.

“Okay, Saejima, here you go. Sorry about the camping trip”, Kiryu said, handing Saejima a wrapped flashlight, very similar to the one he and Goromi had lost during their trip to Sameyama resort. As a sort of interest fee, Kiryu also gave Saejima a thermos to keep his campfire tea and coffee warm for hours to come.

“Heh, I was kinda thinkin’ where I had lost my flashlight. Oh well, this one’s lot cooler anyway”, Saejima said.

“Goromi, I got this for you. I hope you like it, I really don’t know... I saw something like this in one of Nishiki’s fashion magazines and thought something like that might suit you...” Kiryu rambled nervously. Why, he wasn’t sure. Maybe because he had never bought a gift to a girl before.

Goromi tore the gift open in a blink of an eye, and she gasped upon seeing a necklace. It was a leather choker with gold letters spelling her name, Goromi.

“It’s beautiful! I wanna wear it immediately, Kiryu, help me put this on!” she demanded, jumping up from under the kotatsu and sitting in front of Kiryu, who helped to close the buckle of the choker. For some reason, she never returned to her original place, but stayed there right next to Kiryu all the way until Akiyama announced he’d have to leave. This happened about half an hour later.

“Aww, already?” Goromi asked.

“Yeah, I should sneak back to school before the night guard appears. I swear that dude’s suspicious somehow”,

Akiyama told. While speaking, he gave a very odd glance towards Saejima, as if he meant to say something more.

“Need a ride?” Saejima offered, getting up from underneath the kotatsu. Akiyama nodded.

“Not that you’d need to, but it’s Christmas and all. Who knows if the trains run at this hour”, he explained himself.

“Makes sense, yeah. It’s no big deal”, Saejima replied.

“Bro, what about the... My other gift?” Goromi asked out of the blue. Kiryu had no idea what this was about, but there was clearly a secret everyone but him knew about. He didn’t know how to feel about that.

“It’s taken care off”, Saejima said, smiling. “Alright, we’ll be off. See ya soon, I hope.”

“Bye, and thanks for this nice evening. You really are precious friends to have, I barely find the words to express my gratitude”, Akiyama said, closing the door behind him. Now there was only Kiryu and Goromi left.

“Should I leave too?” Kiryu asked, still feeling like he was an outsider. Or maybe his mind was just playing tricks on him.

“No, ya can stay if ya want. I mean, I’d like it if you’d stay, but I get that you’re busy and all...” Goromi said, poking her index fingers together and blushing slightly.

“I guess I can stick around for a while longer”, Kiryu agreed. Nishiki had a date with Yumi, so Kiryu would just spend the evening home alone.

“Thanks! Wanna play some video games? I got Sega Saturn from my crazy rich uncle Homare just few days ago”, Goromi bragged, pointing at the gray console sitting next to small CRT television. There were few games next to it and two controllers.

While booting the console up, Goromi told more about this uncle Homare. As the story progressed, it became apparent this man wasn’t some millionaire, but mentally unstable and had a bit of cash to spare from work no one was entirely sure what it was exactly, as he refused to talk about it. He wore a fancy suit and expensive jewelry in one photograph of him that Goromi had on her bookshelf. It was a very old photo. Goromi was but a kid back then and she looked very different with short hair and somewhat tomboyish clothes. She sat on her uncle’s lap, and they both had bright smiles.

The game Goromi wanted to play with Kiryu was called Virtua Fighter. It was a fighting game, and apparently those were a lot more fun to play with a friend than against artificial intelligence. Goromi’s character of choice was a blonde girl named Sarah Brynt, and she wore a skintight suit. Goromi had made this pick based entirely ‘cause this character reminded her of herself. Kiryu picked Chinese martial arts guy named Akira Yumi, not only he looked cool and capable, but Nishiki’s first name was Akira as well.

Eventually, Goromi grew too salty to want to play anymore. While her strategy was mostly button smashing, Kiryu managed to learn few of the most basic combos, and the most important skill of fighting games, how to block.

Kiryu looked at the fancy new clock on his wrist to realize that the last train to home before the next morning would leave soon. As much fun as he had had tonight with Goromi, all good things had to come to an end eventually, sadly enough.

“I gotta go, my train leaves soon”, Kiryu told after one particularly hectic game. “I had fun today, really.”

As Kiryu got up to take his leave, Goromi followed him and stopped him by the door.

“Look”, she said, pointing towards the roof. There was a leaf hanging above the door frame.

“What of it? Do you want me to get rid of it?” Kiryu asked, not really seeing what Goromi was trying to say.

“No, ya silly! It’s a mistletoe”, Goromi explained, leaving Kiryu just as clueless as he had been before.

“I didn’t know they grow in here”, Kiryu replied.

“They don’t. Or do they? I dunno, and I couldn’t care less”, Goromi shrugged.

“If you don’t care, why are you telling me about it?” Kiryu still didn’t understand Goromi.

Why did she always have to be so complicated? Why couldn’t she ever just say what she wanted to say?

“Argh! I swear you’re gonna be the death of me”, Goromi sighed, rubbing her temples. “Ya really don’t

know what it means when a boy and a girl stand underneath a mistletoe?"

Most of the time Kiryu's cluelessness, outright stupidity, was cute, but not when Goromi just wanted to make a move, it felt just aggravating. Had this boy never seen a romantic Christmas movie, hell, even rom-com anime ever in his life?

"One of us will sneeze because it's highly allergenic plant?" Kiryu suggested.

"What? I haven't heard of that one. Argh, stupid Saejima, makin' you into some sorta plant nerd. Accordin' to Christmas tradition, when girl and boy stand underneath a mistletoe like we right now, they're supposed to... to... to kiss..." Goromi said, blushing heavily as she as much as thought about kissing Kiryu. Why had she felt so brave all evening, but was now getting cold feet suddenly?

"Why?" Kiryu asked.

"What do you mean why? Stop askin' stupid questions already, would ya? Fine, ya don't want to kiss, okay, I get it. Then be on your way. Guess I... Nevermind..." Goromi shrugged, already turning around to return to the living room. Her voice was sad, as if it was about to crack.

"Hey, I'm sorry if I upset you in any way, I just don't understand. Fine, come here", Kiryu said in direction of Goromi's back.

Goromi turned around, a suspicious look on her face. Kiryu reached out for her hand.

He pressed his lips against the back of Goromi's hand.

"I'm still not sure what this is about, but if this makes you happy, it makes me happy too. I really gotta go now. Merry Christmas, and thanks for the party."

Kiryu took his leave, and Goromi stood there by the door speechless, staring at her hand. She had expected something a lot more, but for some reason, she still felt like the happiest girl in the world at that very moment. One thing was for certain, though. She had to give Saejima a call to give it a rest with the plant trivia or Kiryu would never see Goromi's attempts at approach.

## EPISODE 11

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When you make me smile and you turn your long  
blonde hair

Months had passed, as was the norm in the society we live in. It was now February, and exactly halfway through the month, meaning it was no other day, than the day of celebration of some Christian martyr called Saint Valentine of Rome who had lived and died somewhat thousand and eight hundred years ago.

Goromi had long awaited this day. Not that she knew of the origins of this day. No, all she knew that today was the day of lovers, and what better way to confess her love for Kiryu, than a handmade chocolate cake. Even if

Goromi said it herself, this was her best work yet. The batter had tasted good and the frosting too. The candies decorating it were beautifully in balance on top of the cake, and the charming animal design was sure to be a hit with its recipient.

Somewhere else, specifically in the train station, a certain young man named Kiryu Kazuma, was making his way towards the school. He was clueless (as usual) about what day it was. To him, this day was but another Tuesday.

Upon reaching the school, everything was still business as usual to Kiryu. He passed through the doors and headed straight to the lockers in the main hall. As he opened the door to put his outdoor shoes away, he saw... something. It was monstrous. Kiryu had to look twice just to realize what it was.

It was clear that the item itself was a cake dome, but what was underneath it was more of a mystery. It was brown and lumpy, full of sticks. There was a painful expression on that lump of frosting and two beads supposing to mimic eyes staring into the eternity, just begging for swift death.

Kiryu was too afraid to take it out. She quickly swapped his shoes to slippers and locked the locker door. He'd figure this out later. Maybe Nishiki would know something of this?

Kiryu walked to classroom and sat through the first class of the day of geography. Today's subject was

tectonic plates that had formed volcanoes and caused earthquakes.

“Psst, bro”, Kiryu whispered to Nishiki sitting next to him.

“What is it?” he asked, turning around.

“There was a weird cake in my locker. Or I think it was supposed to be a cake. Any idea what this is all about?” Kiryu wondered out loud, hoping Nishiki would have some insight on this matter.

“You didn’t check the calendar today. Oh boy... You’re in one heck of a surprise”, Nishiki grinned. Kiryu was about to protest, but the teacher shushed the boys sitting in the back of the class to keep quiet or they’d have more time to speak on detention.

About forty minutes later, the bell rang. As if its delicate tone like that would’ve invited an earthquake over, as Kiryu felt loud thuds outside the classroom. The door busted open only a few seconds later. It was Goromi, who had just came for an unexpected visit.

“Kiryu-chan!” she greeted, running towards Kiryu’s desk.

“Oh, hi Goromi”, Kiryu welcomed his visitor. “What brings you here? Seems you have something on your mind after all that rush.”

“Should we go for date?” Goromi suggested out of blue.

“You mean the history teacher, Date-san? Why, did you have some trouble with your homework?” Kiryu

asked. If that was the case, he would've been happy to help. Or Akiyama, after all, he was pretty good with history.

"No, ya sillyhead! Do you have any idea what date is?" Goromi sighed, rolling her eyes on Kiryu's answer.

Kiryu looked at the calendar hanging on the wall in back of the classroom.

"14<sup>th</sup> of February. What of it?" Kiryu answered.

"It's Valentine's day!" Goromi told.

"Oh, I didn't realize", Kiryu said. Suddenly everything made a lot more sense to him.

"I swear, for a smart guy you're really fuckin' stupid. Whatever. Just meet me in the gardenin' shack on lunch break, and take the cake with ya!" Goromi stated, as she already took her leave.

Poor Kiryu didn't even realize until the halfway through the next class, that there was no way Goromi could've known about the cake, as Kiryu hadn't mentioned a single word about it to anyone but Nishiki.

The bell rang. The hungry students packed away their books to make room for their desks to devour their homemade meals or quick snacks from vending machines.

"Finally, time for some grub. I'm starvin'! Anyone seen Goromi around? My girl shoulda bought me some chocolates by now", Goda asked, stretching just to flex around just how much bigger he was than any of his friends.

“She visited here just after the first class when you were out smoking”, one particularly small and cowardly boy answered to Goda’s question.

“Ah, she must’ve been lookin’ for me”, Goda said with overflowing confidence.

“No, she was here to see Kiryu, actually”, the boy revealed. Goda’s pride changed into fury. By the time he looked around to see the bastard trying to woo his girl, Kiryu was already halfway to the gardening shack, the plastic cake dome in his hands.

It was chilling outside. Kiryu saw his hastened breathing fuming up in the air. He hurried so that he’d get to the shack as soon as possible with no unwanted confrontations. The cake in his hands would pique the curiosity of FETA (Folks for Ethically Tasty Aliments), NAGA (Nippon Alien & Galaxy Analysis), FCI (Feral Cake Inspectors) and who knows what else organizations with catchy acronyms as their names.

Goromi was waiting for Kiryu in the gardening shack. She sat on an armrest of the couch, Akiyama’s leg on her lap. She was writing something on a cast on his leg.

“What happened?” Kiryu asked, stopping by the door.

“I got some nasty burns. I’ll tell you more when Saejima’s here, I’m sure he’ll want to hear this one”, Akiyama answered. He seemed to be fine apart from his leg. He was smiling, and judging from his position, he had napped until maybe a few minutes ago. “Is this the cake you told about, Goromi?”

"Yup! Cute, isn't it?" Goromi grinned, looking at Kiryu's direction. "Happy Valentine's day!"

"So that's what this cake is about?" Kiryu wondered, laying the cake on the coffee table in front of the couch.

Goromi had already laid down four plates for the four of them who'd be sharing this chocolaty treat. She got up and began looking for a knife or some other tool to cut it to slices. Kiryu remembered the multi-tool Saejima had given him a few months prior.

As Kiryu was just about to dig the knife into the cake, Saejima walked in. There was a lot to process in everything he saw. First, the cake. Second, Akiyama sitting there with his leg in a cast full of doodles and words hoping for quick recovery. And of course, then there was Kiryu with a knife in his hands, looming above the hedgehog from nightmares.

"Well well well", Saejima said. Even if he had driven Goromi to school, she hadn't allowed him to get a single glimpse of her surprise for Kiryu. All he had known that she had a cake with her, that was very fragile and would mess up from even the slightest of touch. To be honest, Saejima was sure the cake couldn't have looked any worse even if he had driven over it.

"Saejima! You're not gonna believe this", Akiyama greeted, waving his hand.

"What's goin' on? Are ya hurt?" Saejima asked. He sounded worried.

"Remember the sleeping bag you gave me for Christmas?" Akiyama started. Saejima nodded to

encourage Akiyama to continue with the story. "Well, it caught on fire last night. Like proper spontaneous self combustion style."

"What the...?" Saejima gasped, as well as Kiryu. Goromi had already heard the story earlier this morning, so she stood silent.

"No idea. I was laying down as usual, about to fall asleep, when I suddenly felt hot and the end of the sleeping bag was in flames", Akiyama explained. "There was no open fire anywhere nearby, not even cigarette butts or electricity. I triple checked just to make sure I wasn't going insane, but I guess I am. I mean, how can sleeping bag, made of fabric and feathers, set ablaze out of nowhere?"

"That's a good question... I guess ya didn't hurt yourself too bad, considerin' you're here and not in hospital", Saejima kept worrying.

"I have second-degree burns on my right leg, but other than that there's nothing too serious", Akiyama told. "I'm meeting up with a lawyer after school to sue the company. Who knows, maybe I'll go from rags to riches? If you'd have the receipt of the purchase still around, it'd really help us out."

"I should have it stored. Now what's with this cake? I've seen carcasses less gruesome than that thing", Saejima asked. He had meant it as nothing but light-hearted joke, but Goromi seemed to have taken a great offense in those words.

"I worked real hard on that cake, y'know?" Goromi muttered after gathering herself for a few moments.

Kiryu felt a sting in his heart. Goromi had really tried her hardest, and all of them, he himself included, had been unsupportive. Upon closer inspection, guess this cake was adorable in its own, very cursed way. How it would taste, however, that was the part Kiryu worried about. So far none of the Goromi's attempts at consumables had been successful, but everyone deserved a second chance. Or third. Or tenth.

"I guess it's kinda cute", Kiryu said, looking at Goromi who's face brightened up in an instant, after all, it was Kiryu who she had made this cake to begin with.

Now Kiryu was faced with a dilemma he had never expected to come in. Where would he cut? Chop off with the head, or maybe a slice from the side. Saejima's instructions to skin the animal before any cuts didn't seem like a good idea right now, after all this wasn't a real animal but an imitation of a Lovecraftian version of a hedgehog.

"Here it goes", Kiryu said, cutting himself a slice of cake, beheading the hedgehog. Underneath the chocolate mousse acting as a frosting, assorted candies as facial details and a couple of chocolate covered stick shaped cookies as spikes, there was a white, layered sponge cake with jam and whipped cream in-between. Kiryu dug a spoon into the cake and took the first bite.

It tasted... Normal? Maybe just a bit too much sugar on the dough and not enough of the jam, but nothing that would make it inedible.

"This tastes good", Kiryu said, not even lying.

"Ya really think so?" Goromi asked. She didn't seem as surprised as Saejima and Akiyama. Apparently they had had their fair share of Goromi's cooking as well. Not a big surprise, after all Saejima was like a brother to her, and Akiyama as homeless probably couldn't give up a change for a free meal even if it would taste terrible.

"Yeah. Oh yeah, Ryuji was looking for you, mentioned something about you owing him chocolate", Kiryu told in between the bites. The rest of the gang all took turns to cut down slices from the cake too, everyone surprised it tasted so ordinary.

"Ugh, gimme a break. I can't believe that fuckin' pompadork's still after me. Why are guys always so stupid? There are those who never know when to let it go. And maybe even worse, those who won't realize ya want them to hold ya no matter how many times ya tell 'em", Goromi sighed, rolling her eye.

"Your crush still hasn't responded to your feelings, huh?" Akiyama asked. He seemed both amused and sorry at the same time.

"You have a crush on someone? Well, I guess you girls sometimes say things sorta... vaguely. You do that too, I've noticed. Sorry. Um, have you ever confessed to this person, like, face to face?" Kiryu suggested. He knew

he had no place of giving love advice to Goromi, after all, he himself had never had a girlfriend.

"I like ya, how much longer are ya gonna take to notice it?" Goromi said, speaking quite loud and clear.

"Yeah, something like that. Anyone should get the message after confession like that, although I'm not sure if the passive-aggressive tone is appreciated", Kiryu answered.

"Oh boy", both Akiyama and Saejima exhaled at the same time, looking at each other. Kiryu was cutting himself another piece of cake and totally missed the sight of Goromi, who both looked and sounded like a kettle about to boil over.

Quite soon after they had devoured the cake to its last crumbs, Kiryu realized he should head back to the main building for the first lesson of the latter half of the day. Upon reaching the classroom, he saw Ryuji leaning over Nishiki's desk in quite menacing fashion.

"Bro, are you okay?" Kiryu hurried over to check the situation.

Ryuji turned his head around to see Kiryu. On instant, he left Nishiki alone. The poor boy was visibly afraid, eyes glistening and face paler than usual.

"Leave him alone", Kiryu insisted, giving Ryuji the rudest glance he could pull off at the moment.

"Sure, as soon as you leave my girlfriend alone", Ryuji demanded, looking down on Kiryu.

“The last time I checked, she wasn’t your girlfriend”, Kiryu corrected. Nishiki looked at his brother, thinking whether Kiryu was brave or foolish, and ended up on a conclusion he was both of them.

“Maybe not yet, but she will be eventually. I’ll make sure of that”, Ryuji bragged, puffing out his chest. Few of his buddies backed him up with agreeing nods and pats on the back.

“How about letting Goromi make her own decisions? I thought you knew her well enough to know she isn’t some pushover you seem to think of her as”, Kiryu defended.

“Look, she’s a girl, as if she’d know what’s best for her. I mean, she keeps hangin’ around with a loser like you”, Ryuji forced himself to laugh to hide the frustration brewing inside him.

Ryuji wasn’t the only one who was itching for a fight. Kiryu knew violence would solve nothing, and that Ryuji would turn him into minced meat patties in a matter of seconds, but he just couldn’t listen to him talking about Goromi like that. Goromi was a smart girl, especially for disliking jerk like Ryuji. There were many girls in this school who would’ve given just about anything to hang out with a big and handsome guy like him, but Ryuji’s eyes were only on Goromi. As admirable as that attitude was, Goromi’s heart could not be won over by being a douchebag.

Probably.

Not like Kiryu knew her well enough to know if she'd like naïve guys who kept playing hero at the cost of constant bruises and trips to school nurse...

The bell rang to tell the students it was time to finish up the last lesson of the day. Kiryu was about to head to the gardening shack for his club activities, but he had barely gotten around to leave the classroom, when he felt a hand wrapping around his forearm.

"Time for our date", Goromi said. "Hurry, if we go now no one will notice us, not with all these students floodin' the hallways."

Kiryu didn't get a chance to protest, but he had a bad feeling of Goromi dragging him into trouble again. She kept pulling him towards the stairs. Kiryu had never been past the third floor, where there were mostly teacher's room and some club rooms. The fourth floor was apparently for storage, and students had no business to go there. But then again, Goromi had never been the kind of girl to follow rules. There were no more stairs beyond the fourth floor, only boxes, desks, chairs, all kinds of furniture. Before Kiryu could look around properly, Goromi led him to a metal door.

"Where are we going? I'm supposed to meet with Saejima, I think", Kiryu finally found the time to speak his mind.

"Shh, it's a surprise. And I told him you'd be with me", Goromi said back, opening the door.

Icy wind blew at their faces as soon as the door pulled open. Goromi hadn't still let go of Kiryu's arm, but dragged him through the doorway. It shocked Kiryu to see that he had just been taken to the school's roof. As breathtaking as the view from this high up was, he very much had a feeling he most certainly shouldn't have been there.

Goromi must have noticed how uneasy Kiryu felt, as she soon spoke after closing the door behind them.

"I'm not gonna hurt ya, relax. I just wanted to show ya this place. Pretty, ain't it?" she spoke, leaning against the fence going around the rooftop, gazing into the distance. "Sometimes when I just wanna chill, think about life and other stuff, I come here."

"I guess I can kinda see the appeal", Kiryu agreed, joining Goromi to watch the cityscape surrounding them.

The cars, the trees, everything seemed so small and distant looking from up there. Almost as if the two of them were in whole another world. A few lonely clouds drifted on the sky, leaving plenty of room for the sun, desperately trying to warm up the winter's day, to melt off the bits of remaining snow to make room for the spring. Soon enough, the cherry trees around the schoolyard would decorate the grounds in their pastel pink tones.

But there was no need to dwell on that, not now. Just breathe in, look around, enjoy the surreal, unexplainably

comfortable feeling you only felt in a place like this, secluded in the middle of all the fuss.

Kiryu looked at Goromi. Her eye was staring at the far distance. She had a mellow smile as her gaze dragged along the horizon. The wind played with her hair, tossing it around. The motion and the color made Kiryu think about fields of wheat back in the countryside. This memory brought warmth into his heart. (Or maybe, just maybe, it was the presence of Goromi that made him feel like that.)

“Thanks for bringing me here”, Kiryu said, trying to speak softly, as if his words would ruin the mood if they were to be any louder.

Goromi looked back at Kiryu, her smile revealing she was just about to say something, when the door back to the stairway busted open.

“Found you!” Ryuji roared, interrupting Kiryu’s and Goromi’s shared moment of solitude.

Ryuji was furious. He didn’t even bother for a stealthier method of approaching, but barged in like he owned the school. Well, he thought he did, to be precise, the self-crowned king of the school.

“Shit, I didn’t expect he’d bother to look for me from up here”, Goromi sighed towards Kiryu’s direction. “Play along.”

“What are you doin’ here with him?” Ryuji asked, walking closer. He made sure to seem as big as threatening as he could to establish dominance over his opponents.

“What does it look like?” Goromi asked, sliding her hand for Kiryu to hold.

“No, this is not possible...” Ryuji said, defeat shining through his tough guy act. “I was supposed to be the one to take your hand-holdin’ virginity.”

Hand-holding virginity? Just what the heck was that supposed to mean, Kiryu didn’t understand, but judging from the shocked expression on Ryuji’s face, it was quite a big deal.

“You’re too late. My heart already belongs to him. Right, Kazzy-kun, my darlin’?” Goromi cooed on voice so sweet Kiryu felt like he’d want to avoid candy shops for the next few weeks at least.

“Yeah...” Kiryu muttered back, trying to sound convincing and happy enough to fool Ryuji. Kiryu needed an affectionate name right now. He looked at Goromi, as if the sight of her would offer something to catch on. Her hair flailed in the wind. It was mesmerizing, disturbing Kiryu’s thoughts... Hair... So soft... Like silk. Eureka!

“She doesn’t want to be with a brute like you”, Kiryu directed at Ryuji, before returning his words back to Goromi. “Right, my little silk beetle?”

“Silk beetle? Nani the fuck? She ain’t some nasty bug you’d just smash. No one smashes my Goromi but me!” Ryuji kept going with her overly possessive attitude, which Kiryu found more and more revolting each passing second.

“Her hair’s soft as the finest silk. Then again, not like you’d ever get to witness that”, Kiryu taunted. Goromi shrieked in awe of these beautifully spoken words, while Ryuji spat on ground, so deeply was he disgusted.

“You’ve touched her hair? Her beautiful golden locks? That does it, you girlfriend stealin’ bastard!” Ryuji shouted. Seemed Kiryu had gone overboard with his taunt, as Ryuji became so filled with rage he stripped of his school jacket with one swift motion and tossed it aside.

Before Kiryu could prepare himself, Ryuji was charging at him at full speed. Kiryu didn’t even have the time to sidestep this incoming attack. No, all Kiryu could do this time was to stand still, block the attack if possible, and otherwise just try to minimize the damage he’d end up taking.

Ryuji grabbed the lapels of Kiryu’s school uniform jacket and lifted him up and pulled him close. The tips of their noses almost touched, and Ryuji’s angry words spat at Kiryu’s face.

“Good luck hittin’ on my girl from the hospital bed”, he threatened, raising his free hand to punch Kiryu. There was no way to block this, so the only thing to do here was to escape. Kiryu realized Ryuji’s legs were unprotected, so Kiryu kicked him in the knee. Ryuji immediately dropped Kiryu back to the ground and held hands over his knee. The kick hadn’t been strong enough to dislocate his kneecap or do any serious

damage, but it was enough to dissolve the situation, at least for now.

To prevent move like this from happening again, Kiryu knew he had to remove his jacket and shirt too. Full of adrenaline from his brief escape, he pulled them both off with one pull. He felt truly like a badass while doing that.

Goromi sighed in awe, seeing two buff, good-looking young men fighting for her. Too bad one of them was a moronic asshole, and another one was an idiot with a heart of gold.

“You think you can take me? Even my sister looks tougher than you”, Ryuji laughed, trying to make Kiryu feel insecure. Those words didn’t weigh Kiryu down, not one bit. He knew well enough that what he lacked in size and sheer force, he probably won over in determination. After all, there was no way he’d allow anyone to talk badly of Goromi and leave the scene without feeling the consequences for days to come.

“Good for your sister, then. I’m sorry for her for having such a terrible brother”, Kiryu replied, thinking the comeback was rather witty.

Ryuji was prepared to make another attack. He was cracking his knuckles and looking at Kiryu, thinking where to strike next. This time, Kiryu was prepared to take a counter-measures. Whether it would be in form of a sidestep, block or attack, that he didn’t know yet, but it would soon be clear.

After a few careful steps, Ryuji sort of leaped towards Kiryu, throwing a strong punch, which knew right away he had no chance of blocking. Instead, he opted for a quick jab to Ryuji's side. Both fighters, Kiryu and Ryuji, took their fair share of damage. Kiryu felt his shoulder getting quite a hit, and Ryuji's side sting from this unexpected strike.

This exchange of hits confirmed it for Kiryu. Ryuji was a man of action, he much preferred powerful attacks over covering for himself. Whether Kiryu would find a way to use this to his advantage, he'd soon find it out.

Or not.

"What's going on in here?" a girl's voice spoke. It didn't sound like Goromi, so both Kiryu and Ryuji turned around to look at the direction of the interruption.

Kaoru stood by the doorway, dual-wielding a pair of staplers. She had a mean look in her, as if she was not afraid to make them staples fly on every breaker of the rules who'd cross her path.

"Sis, what are you doin' here?" Ryuji was the first to break the silence.

"Sister?" both Kiryu and Goromi asked at the same time, looking at each other and then eyeing between these just revealed siblings.

"I heard the ruckus you two were causing. So, which one of you started it?" Kaoru spoke strictly, having no mercy on neither her brother nor Kiryu, who she had

once had a slight crush on (which Kiryu had totally missed).

“Me and Kiryu-chan were just chillin’ here when this jerk came in and caused a scene”, Goromi told straight away. Kaoru had a disbelief in her face as she looked at Goromi, whom she hadn’t even paid attention to before she had spoken.

“First of all, none of you should be here. Second, you’re a known troublemaker, so your word doesn’t have much weight in this investigation”, Kaoru stated, turning her face back to Kiryu and Ryuji, who were too afraid of Kaoru to throw any more punches. Ryuji had been right, Kaoru was tough and scary, at least when she was feeling extremely righteous on her student council duties. No wonder, your average student council held more power than the Pope, the Illuminati and the president of United Nations combined.

“Goromi’s speaking the truth. And I’m sorry for coming here. I swear we meant no harm, we just wanted to look at the scenery”, Kiryu covered up for Goromi.

“Sis, are you really gonna believe those fuckin’ losers?” Ryuji asked. “Just look how badly Kiryu beat me up just now. I was only tryin’ to save Goromi from this... this pervert. They’re holdin’ hands and shit!”

Kaoru was left with a tough choice of whose words to believe. It was two versus one on these claims whether it was Kiryu, a known to be a good and well-behaved student, or Ryuji, well-established troublemaker but also her very own brother. Whatever was the conclusion

she'd come to, she finally had dirt on Goromi. Trespassing would surely be enough of a reason for a teacher to book Goromi for a detention.

But then again, if she'd punish Goromi, would it be considered an act of jealousy? If so, Kaoru wouldn't be any better than her brother. Maybe it was time to let go. Kiryu had made his choice clearly enough, there was no need to rip that happiness from him. Sometimes the greatest act of love one could do was to let the other one be happy.

"Goda Ryuji, I'm going to have to give you a warning for inappropriate behavior. If you'd follow me to the teacher's room", Kaoru finally stated, speaking in cold and efficient tone. Ryuji had an expression of his face that he was about to protest, but when Kaoru pointed the nail guns at him, he got up, sighing in defeat.

"Screw you, Goromi. I always preferred redheads anyway", Ryuji jeered. "Anyone seen my jacket, by the way? I could really use a cig right about now."

"Could use what?" Kaoru asked, eyeing her brother suspiciously. Of course she knew Ryuji smoked, that was difficult fact to hide, but admitting it so boldly in front of her had been unexpected.

"C'mon sis, gimme a break. My heart just got broken", Ryuji tried to plead. Kaoru smiled, rolled her eyes.

"Fine. But give me one as well", she said back. Ryuji's look was astonished, but he couldn't deny this little

pleasure in the midst of all the pain, not even from his sister.

“I didn’t know you smoke”, he spoke, lighting the cigarette at the corner of her mouth.

“I don’t”, she grinned. “And if either of you tells about this to anyone, I’ll make sure to write in about your little trespassing and hand-holding.”

Kiryu realized he was still standing around without his jacket and looking like a total fool, just like Ryuji. He picked up his jacket from the ground and put it on. It was pretty damn cold now that the fight had ended.

“I’m going to have to ask for you to come with me as well. I’ll let you off the hook just this once, but you can’t hang around in here”, Kaoru said, a bitter smile on her face.

“Please, just give us five more minutes, I was just about to conf-” Goromi begged.

“No. And hand-holding and other public displays of affection are permitted on school grounds, so keep those hands separate and where I can see them”, Kaoru insisted, the tone of her words hinting there was no use trying to talk her down from this.

As pissed off as Goromi was from this, Kiryu was just grateful they didn’t get any punishment from this trespassing. And that for now it seemed that Ryuji had finally given up with Goromi.

Just how much more trouble could this school year still fit in? The semester, Kiryu’s first and Goromi’s last year, would end in only a few more weeks.



## EPISODE 12

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Kiss this goodbye

Rows upon rows of students, all wearing similar uniforms, black seifukus with white details or straight black pants and jackets. The headmistress Dojima stood in front of them all on a stage, giving an incredibly long speech everyone tried their best to not to interrupt with their yawns. The spring was out there with sunshine, blossoming trees and flowers, warm weather, and they all had to sit here trying their hardest not to fall asleep.

Kiryu felt just as tired as everyone, though he blamed it on Nishiki, his brother. Nishiki had woken Kiryu up two hours before it was necessary just because he was feeling nervous. Nishiki's band, the Lawbreakers, would perform today in front of the entire school. Kiryu was

glad gardening club had no such show to put up. Thinking about the gardening club, Saejima would graduate today, just as well as her sister, Goromi. They both sat at the front row. There was no mistaking Saejima, who was a head taller from everyone else, and Goromi's bleached hair was sure to attract attention.

Akiyama, Kiryu's classmate, sat next to Kiryu and was asleep, as usual. His leg injury from about a month ago was healing up nicely, and would probably be as good as new when their second school year would start in April few weeks from now. If it wasn't for Akiyama, who knows just how lonely Kiryu would be then.

But now was not the time to worry about that. No, it was time to celebrate those who had worked hard and were now about to move on with their lives. The headmistress Dojima had started calling up the third-year students one by one, where she'd give them their diplomas and a firm handshake.

"Goromi", the headmistress read from the list of names. Kiryu poked Akiyama to wake him up.

Goromi got up from her seat and walked to the stage. The headmistress gave her a judging look. Goromi had still refused to wear her uniform properly, her white loose socks were on rolls, the scarf was untied and the skirt was so long she struggled with the few stairs there were to get to the stage. Goromi's eye scanned through the crowd as she got her diploma, and she spotted Kiryu and Akiyama, showing them her gratuitous victory pose and v-shaped fingers. The headmistress gave Goromi

another rude glance, but she just didn't care, knowing she never had to see that old hag ever again.

Some names later, Saejima got called up as well. Even when he knew how to act properly, or at least better than Goromi, he was still quite a sight to witness. He also waved at Kiryu and Akiyama, Goromi had probably told him about their seats.

Kiryu had never properly realized just how many third years students there were in this school, as the ceremony just kept going on and on. He just wanted to see Nishiki's performance, and even more so, to congratulate both Goromi and Saejima.

The ceremony had felt longer than the entire school year, but it finally came to an end. Kiryu could barely leave the hall before he heard Goromi running towards her.

"I passed! Can ya imagine!" she celebrated, hugging Kiryu tight. "I couldn't've done this without ya! Seriously."

"Congratulations. I'm proud of you, really", Kiryu said, patting Goromi's back to signal he could barely breathe in her tight embrace.

Soon after Goromi, Saejima followed. He seemed happy as well, but whether it was for his own grades or for the fact Goromi had passed, that wasn't clear.

"Congratulations for you too", Kiryu said, opting for a handshake, but Saejima grabbed Kiryu into a tiger-like, tight embrace. Related by blood or not, at least they

both gave hugs in very similar manner; affectionately and deadly.

Akiyama, who had left the hall with Kiryu, got his fair share of hugs too. Towards Akiyama these just-graduated students were more careful, after all, Akiyama still had trouble putting too much weight on his sore leg, even though he was already free of the cast and crutches.

“Ya seem happy now that I look at ya. I take it that the lawsuit worked out for ya then?” Saejima asked from Akiyama.

“Better than I expected, truth to be told. I got enough money to rent me a flat and got some spare to try out investing. Been curious about that, but not like anyone would sell their shares for few empty cans of Prof. Pepper”, Akiyama told. Kiryu couldn’t remember seeing Akiyama this joyful ever before, and it was no surprise. Breaking the chain of homelessness was definitely something to be glad about.

“When are ya gonna hold house comin’ party? I can cook somethin’. And if you ever need help with decoratin’ the place, I’m your girl”, Goromi offered.

“I’ll keep that in mind”, Akiyama said. The look on his face told he’d try to forget all about this offer as soon as possible.

“I thought you said you’re no one’s girl?” Kiryu pointed out Goromi’s words, which she had spoken when they were discussing her relationship with Ryuji for the first time.

“Ya actually remember what I’ve been sayin’? That’s impressive, ‘cause I sure as fuck don’t half of the time”, Goromi replied, visibly impressed with the attention Kiryu had given to her words.

“Maybe you’d remember if you’d talk less and actually think every now and then?” Saejima laughed. If it would’ve been anyone else speaking those words, they would’ve ended up with a black eye, but this was but a good-humored roasting between siblings, so it was all fine.

“Whatever. As I was about to... Wait a minute, I totally forgot what I was about to say to Kiryu-chan here. Thanks a lot bro”, Goromi sighed. “Should we go outside? I could really use a cigarette right about now.”

They all left the school building, which was crowded as ever. School grounds were also bustling with life. Some students were crying as they had to separate from their friends, others were excited to get out of here for good.

With Goromi’s lead, they finally found a nice, relatively calm spot to chill out in. Goromi leaned against the school’s exterior wall and lit a cigarette.

“Hey, we’re still in school area, I don’t think you’re allowed to smoke”, Kiryu pointed out. Goromi laughed.

“Hah, what are they gonna do? Give me detention?” she responded. She had a point there, as she was no longer a student in there. The worst outcome would be her getting directed to somewhere else to finish her dose of nicotine.

Goromi offered rounds of smokes for everyone else as well, so happy she was about her passing grades. Both Saejima and Akiyama accepted this offer gracefully, both somewhat occasional smokers after all, a minor detail which Kiryu hadn't known before. Whether it was the peer pressure or just sheer curiosity, Kiryu decided to give it a try as well after carefully looking around to make sure Nishiki was nowhere near witnessing this.

Kiryu knew he regretted this decision immediately as he sucked in the first drag. Absolutely terrible, the taste was like you'd imagine how swallowing an ashtray would feel like and Kiryu threw a coughing fit right away. Goromi laughed and patted Kiryu in the back.

"There there, you'll get used to it", she calmed him.

"Why on earth would I want to get used to this?" Kiryu managed to ask between the coughs.

"Cigarettes are easier to acquire than food when you're homeless. They take away the hunger well enough, though you probably didn't know that", Akiyama gave his reasoning. Kiryu had to admit it sort of made sense.

"I like goin' outside, but not really a reason for that in a big city like this. It's nice to stand by the window, breathe in the fresh air outside and ponder about what's goin' on", Saejima backed Akiyama up. Another sort of convincing argument, or Saejima was just really poetic when it came to outdoor activities.

"And it makes ya look so fuckin' cool, that's the best part", Goromi joined in. That was easily the stupidest

argument of those three, Kiryu thought as he took the rest of his cigarette to the nearest trash can to dump it in.

“I think you look cool enough already”, Kiryu said to Goromi upon returning to his friends, swearing he’d never try smoking again.

At one point during the day, both Goromi and Saejima had to go give goodbyes to their other graduating friends. They had all agreed to meet back at the gardening shack when they were done with that.

“I think I’m gonna miss this couch. We sure shared some of my best naps ever. What do you think, would the headmistress Dojima let me take it back at my home, after all, gardening club’s getting disbanded now that Saejima leaves”, Akiyama spoke half to himself, getting comfortable on his spot, probably for the very last time.

Kiryu still hadn’t fully accepted the fact that by April, he’d have to think of a new club to join in. Surely no other club could offer him the friendship like he had made during this year.

“What are you gonna do next year?” Kiryu asked from Akiyama, hoping his words would bring any insight on Kiryu.

“You mean the club thing? I guess I’ll try to join up with the school council. I’d make for a fine finance manager, don’t you think?” Akiyama spoke confidently. Kiryu hadn’t expected Akiyama to come up with an

answer just like that. It was clear he had put some thought into this. “I wanted to do that this year, but I had to prioritize good sleep above all else. But now that that’s out of the way, I’m free to fulfill my dreams. What about you, Kiryu?”

Fulfill his dreams, huh, Kiryu thought to himself. That hadn’t been helpful at all, if something, it had only left Kiryu more confused than before. What did he dream of? This far he had mostly gone by with other people’s suggestions and dragged along his friends. School council didn’t seem like a good, not even very realistic choice, not after Kiryu’s few misdemeanors which were all more or less related to Goromi. Not that he blamed her for any of that. They had all been Kiryu’s own choices to make. And he still, after all this time, only felt glad to have saved her.

Hmm, saving someone. Maybe, just maybe, there was an idea to hang to...

“Do you know if there’s any martial arts club or something like that?” Kiryu asked from Akiyama.

“I think so”, Akiyama answered. Kiryu’s motivation behind all of this was mostly that if he was too much of trouble for the student council, too shy to perform in front of school and lacking any artistic talent, he could at least put his body to good use, as he had never felt afraid, not even when faced with an opponent twice as strong as him.

"This shack sure served us well", Saejima said, walking through the door, Goromi right in his footsteps. "They're gonna tear it down next week."

"About a damn time. It smells like mold in here. Just imagine what it has already done for my health", Goromi spoke. Considering she often skipped classes just to hang around in here, and that she was a smoker on top of that, there was an obvious hypocrisy in her claims.

Saejima asked about both Kiryu's and Akiyama's plans for the next year, and they were more than happy to tell about those plans. However, there was no need to go it all over again, so this part is skipped to avoid repetition.

"So, what about you?" Kiryu asked from Saejima in return.

"Heh, I guess I'll skip town for now. I applied for a gig in Hokkaido, we'll see where it takes me from there", he told. Goromi didn't seem surprised, meaning she had already known about this. Kiryu was feeling sort of sad, after all, Hokkaido was quite far away. Then again, if it was only a gig, Saejima would be back soon enough. "They got a serious problem with bears, payin' good money for skins, so I thought I might as well go there and hone my huntin' skills."

"You'll be back, right?" Kiryu spoke out his hopeful thoughts.

"Aww, ya gonna miss me? Well what's the point of lyin', I'm gonna miss ya guys too! I'll come back, sure, I couldn't leave Goromi alone for too long, just look how

much trouble she got into the last time I left her alone for a year”, Saejima laughed, patting Kiryu’s head affectionately. “Ya look after her while I’m gone, right?”

Kiryu nodded, fearing what he had just signed up for.

“I’ll be just fine, quit fuzzin’ about it”, Goromi shrugged.

“What are you gonna do now that you’ve graduated?” Kiryu asked from her.

“Considerin’ I barely passed, I don’t have that many options to choose from. They’ve asked me to join in the family organization, but it sounds borin’ as fuck. Y’know, meetings with total assholes, havin’ to wear expensive suits, shit like that. Just the thought of it makes me feel dreadful”, Goromi answered. “So I’ll just say fuck and start sellin’ meth. Or become a stripper.”

“Kiryu, make sure she doesn’t do that”, Saejima requested.

“Jeez, I was only jokin’ for fuck’s sake. I just haven’t thought about the finer details yet, but I’ll manage somehow. I mean, I’ve survived this far. Whatever the world throws at me, I’ll make it work. Fuck it, I’ll make the world my bitch if that’s what it takes”, Goromi spoke with her scarily carefree attitude. As much as Saejima wanted to doubt her, Kiryu somehow felt Goromi would make ends meet in the end.

“Goromi, I know my words don’t weigh much as I’m still so much younger than you, but if the family business thing interests you in the slightest, why not join but in your own way? I mean, you passed school,

and even thought the teachers didn't much like you, you still made lots of friends, like us", Kiryu tried to comfort Goromi and give her more confidence over her abilities.

"Ya mean I should just go and run the organization my way?" Goromi rephrased and simplified Kiryu's advice.

"Well, I mean, I guess it's an option. You'll never know unless you try, right?" Kiryu confirmed. After a moment of thinking, a twisted smile arose on Goromi's face.

"Hey, Kiryu, I think ya just gave her some dangerous ideas", Saejima pointed out. Goromi began cackling.

"Some fuckin' brilliant ideas! Y'know what Kiryu, I think you're right. Our family organization could definitely use an unhinged mastermind within its ranks", Goromi agreed. Kiryu wasn't entirely sure what he had just created, but was waiting to see what would come of Goromi's megalomaniac plans. He only hoped for her to stay in Tokyo, so they could stay in touch. If not... Kiryu had to come up with a plan. He wanted to make sure to see his friends again.

"Should we do this sort of class reunion thing once me and Akiyama graduate? With Saejima leaving and Goromi getting busy, there's no way of knowing if we can meet that often anymore", Kiryu suggested. He had seen something like that happening in dramas he used to watch with Nishiki, so guess it would be doable in real life too.

“No way you’d get rid of me that easily. And Goromi will be even harder to get rid of, that I can assure. But sure. Any idea of the date?” Saejima laughed, agreeing with Kiryu’s idea.

“How about the last Saturday of March of 1998, the day of our graduation?” Akiyama was the first to suggest a date. “You’ll definitely be there, right?”

They all shook hands over that agreement. It’d be exactly two years from this day. A lot could happen in two years, but it was not long enough to make you forget friends like this.

Upon making this promise, the four of them thought it was about the time to leave this school, two of them for two long years, the other two for only two weeks.

Goromi looked around her. The cherry trees were blooming. In a few more weeks the blossoms would rain down, just like on that faithful day when Kiryu had saved her from those bullies. It had started out like a high school romance anime with a cute but klutzy girl and heroic boy, but sure hadn’t ended like one, the main couple kissing underneath a rain of cherry blossom petals. As much as Goromi had tried to hide the fact from everyone, even from herself until this year, she had always been a hopeless romantic. Just like many other girls, she had dreamed of high school romance, which was now just another dream of hers to get buried away.

Unless... There was still time!

“Kiryu, wait, I gotta... I gotta tell ya somethin’”, Goromi said. Kiryu turned around. Akiyama

remembered suddenly he still had to go ask something from the headmistress, and Saejima said he'd have to make sure he'd gather all of his personal belongings from the gardening shack he might've forgotten behind.

"What is it, Goromi?" Kiryu asked, approaching Goromi.

Goromi was feeling nervous. She had tried telling this so many times already that this should've come naturally by now. There ought to be one way or another to make Kiryu see. This time, she would make him understand, no matter how many ways she'd have to re-phrase the message.

"It was about a year ago when ya saved me, remember?" Goromi started the conversation, knowing well Kiryu couldn't have forgotten about it.

"Of course. What of it?" Kiryu wondered.

"I've liked ya ever since", Goromi confessed straight away, knowing this alone wouldn't convince Kiryu.

"I know. I was kinda scared of you at first, but turned out you were alright. Everyone tried to warn me about you, but I'm glad I didn't listen to them, 'cause you're one of the greatest friends I've ever had", Kiryu answered. As kind as he had been with his words, Goromi still felt like her heart was shattering to pieces. Had she just been friendzoned, or was Kiryu really just a prime example of an idiot? Goromi hoped and kind of knew for the latter to be the truth.

"I feel a lot stronger about ya than just a friend", Goromi hinted, hoping this would give Kiryu enough clue to know what she meant.

"Really? I always thought Akiyama was your best friend. I mean, you go to a same club and all, and you're always whispering with him", Kiryu admitted his suspicions, but was glad to know he was more important to Goromi than he had given himself the credit for.

Goromi was screaming internally. If this wouldn't move forward soon enough, she just might do it verbally as well. The screaming part, that is.

"Well, he is. I suppose. He listens to me and has helped me out a lot during this year. I'm not sayin' ya hadn't done the exact same, but I like ya in a different way..." Goromi finally found the words to speak. She had no clue where to go from here next.

"Oh, you mean like a brother? I guess I am kinda like Saejima, you've said it a few times I'm starting to sound like him when I talk about plants and nature, and about your studying habits, or the lack of them to be precise", Kiryu finished Goromi's sentence. Or at least tried to, failing miserably at it. Not only Goromi had been friendzoned, she had also just been sisterzoned. What's next? Kiryu would compare her to his mother?

"No! Fuckin' hell... I have no idea on how to say this", Goromi muttered, mostly to herself.

"Me neither. I mean, no idea what you're trying to say here, other than that I mean a lot to you. The feeling is

mutual, by the way, if I didn't make it clear enough. I guess I'm kinda dense sometimes", Kiryu replied.

"Ya got that right. What I'm tryin' to say is that I wanna be your girlfriend", Goromi revealed, thinking she couldn't be much more straight forward than this. If Kiryu still wouldn't understand after this, guess this was just doomed to failure.

"You are, aren't you? I mean, you are a girl and you are my friend. Doesn't that make you my girlfriend?" Kiryu rationalized. Considering Goromi was a friend, she didn't seem all that friendly towards Kiryu anymore. If something, she seemed somewhat frustrated. Was she trying to say something Kiryu just couldn't read between the lines?

Yes. Yes, there was, and Goromi had just about had it with these hints. She could probably propose to him, and he'd still think of the ring as an unexpected gift rather than a romantic act of commitment.

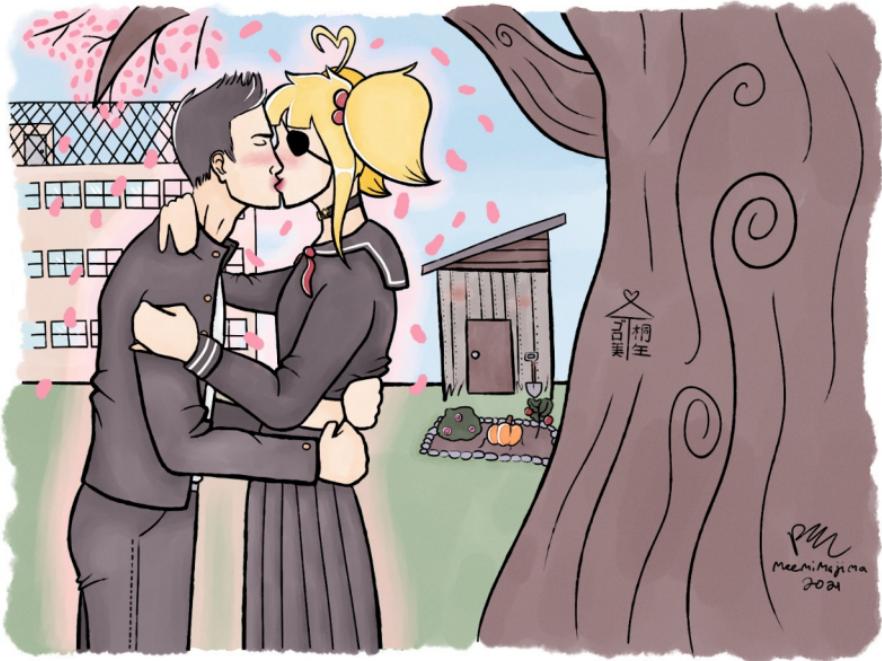
If there was no way to get Kiryu to read the hints, Goromi would have to guide Kiryu through even if it meant holding him by the hand throughout the process.

"I'm gonna do somethin', okay? Close your eyes", Goromi whispered, leaning closer to Kiryu.

Kiryu closed his eyes, not knowing what to expect. Probably some sort of physical prank, as she was getting awfully close. Kiryu could feel her hastened breath on his skin, hear her heart thumping like it was about to pop out of her rib cage.

Right under the very same cherry blossom trees they had met for the very first time, Goromi's lips brushed against Kiryu's. Goromi's dream of high school romance and first kiss underneath a rain of cherry blossoms had come true on her last day of school.

The End.









“Wait a minute”, Kiryu said as his kiss with Goromi came to an end.

“I thought ya might’ve felt the same as I did...” Goromi spoke softly. She wasn’t as confident as usual, and Kiryu had never seen her face this red before.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just... Cherry blossoms shouldn’t fall but a few weeks later”, Kiryu pointed out, looking at the tree just above them.

“Now that ya mention, it is kinda odd”, Goromi said, a faint smile appearing on her face. She had been so worried that Kiryu didn’t like the kiss, but it was only the unnaturally acting nature that had him bothered.

“Watch where you’re going!” Akiyama shouted. “We just ruined their once-in-a-lifetime romantic moment.”

Both Kiryu and Goromi turned to look, and Saejima and Akiyama were carrying the run-down couch they had apparently snatched from the gardening shack.

“Sorry ‘bout that”, Saejima apologized, his face twisted in pain from the unexpected hook up with the tree-chan.

As the two young men moved along with the couch, Goromi faced Kiryu again. Neither of them were there to witness that their friends Saejima and Akiyama were smiling like idiots after finally seeing the hook up that had taken painfully long to spark.

“So ya didn’t mind that? The kiss, I mean” she asked carefully, trying to make sense of Kiryu’s face and the expression on it. Kiryu had a surprised smile.

“It was nice. You kiss well. I think. Not that I’ve kissed with anyone before”, Kiryu babbled on. He was kind of nervous. It had all happened so fast, and he had had no time to prepare for any of this. He wanted to grab Goromi by the hand and cherish her, hold her and never let go, but his hands were all sweaty.

“We can do it again if ya want”, Goromi grinned. “If those two bastards decide to bring the couch back and bump into tree again, I swear I’ll s-”

But Goromi never got around to tell just what she’d do, as Kiryu leaned in and kissed Goromi’s lips in the middle of her sentence. He laid his shaky, sweaty hand on Goromi’s back to pull her closer. Kiryu had never realized what it had been that he had felt towards Goromi, but now that their lips met, he realized that maybe it had been love all along. He didn’t want to let go of her, if something, only hold her as close and as long as possible. As unexpected as it had been, it felt so good, so natural. And as much as anyone had always tried to warn him of Goromi’s wickedness, Kiryu was still glad he had not once given too much thought on those words. Not now, when his lips were devil red as well from Goromi’s smeared lipstick.

The End. (for reals)





